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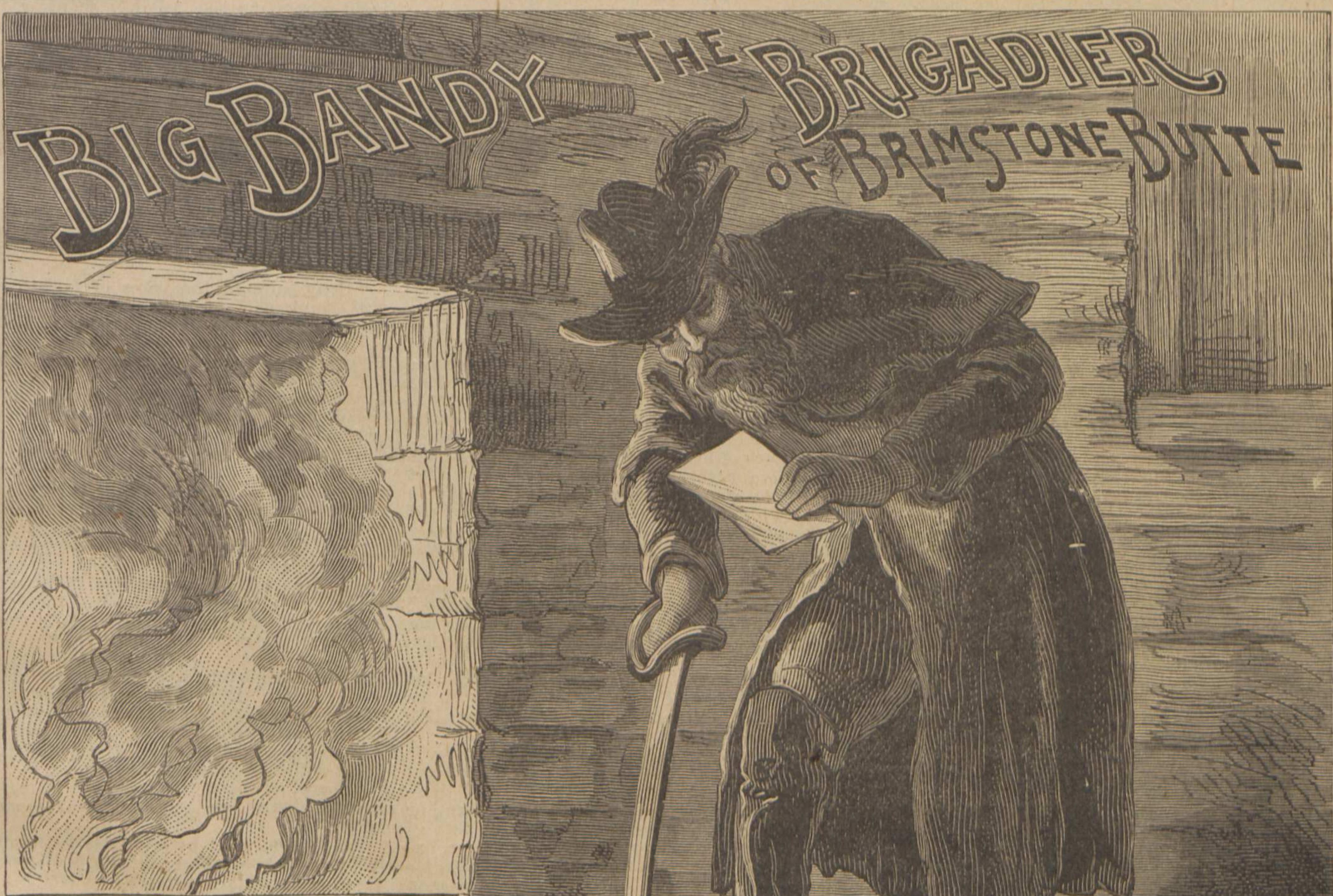
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OR,

The Secrets of the Hollow Hill.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "NOR'WEST NICK," "MONTE JIM,"
"OLD '49," "LONG-HAIRED PARDS,"
"PACIFIC PETE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BARBECUE.

"TENTION, comp'ny!"

"Yar comes the ossifer o' the day!"

"Git onto yer dig, boys, fer hyar's the jig-adier-brin'le!"

"Head up an' eyes a'cordin'-s'lute!"

Cheering, crowing, whistling, uniform only in their good-humored laughter, the more-or-less battle-scarred veterans fairly tumbled over themselves and their immediate neighbors in their haste to form a double line, through which the important personage so recently sighted, might pass them in review.

Yet, through the "horse play" ran a vein of earnestness, which those who felt it strongest might have found no little difficulty in satis-



HOLDING THE PAPER SO THAT THE RED LIGHT OF THE FIRE FELL ACROSS ITS FACE
THE BRIGADIER STUDIED THE MARKS THEREON.

Big Bandy.

factorily explaining, even to themselves. And when the person to whom this mock reception was offered, gravely glanced from face to face as he slowly paced down the double rank, punctiliously acknowledging each salute in due form, each old soldier looked and acted as though he was on parade before his own general.

Judging from the outward man alone, there was little in this new-comer to inspire either respect, awe or reverence.

His broad shoulders were stooped, and, though his army overcoat in part disguised this, his spine took a curve that left one shoulder considerably higher than its mate. His legs were wonderfully bowed. When standing as erect as that deformity would permit, his knees were still more than a foot apart, while in motion that peculiarity was even more pronounced.

In addition to these drawbacks, his face was scarred as though a platoon of horses had trampled over it, or he had been the victim of some terrible explosion. Of all his features, only his eyes seemed to have retained their original beauty: keen, honest, brave and kindly.

His hair, worn long and still luxuriant, was, like his mustaches and full beard, of almost snowy whiteness; the only exception being a yellowish streak down in front, which plainly proved a liking for the Virginian weed.

On his head was a felt hat, with broad brim and curling plume, no less distinctively military than his caped overcoat, his high boots, his gloves with stiffened gauntlets reaching to the elbow, his sash and belt which supported a brace of heavy pistols and a saber.

What though the overcoat was stained and patched, its edges fairly fringed with rags and tatters; the hat and plume weather-worn and frayed; the boots gaping at toes and run down at heel; the sash but a ghost of its original beauty; the gloves without an entire finger? What though the saber was but one of the cheapest ever supplied cavalrymen, with scabbard rusty and battered, the blade notched, and stained with blotches which no amount of scouring could remove?

All this was familiar to many a stout fellow in those ranks, who had only ceased fighting when the "lost cause" perished forever in "the last ditch." Before that day came, they had seen real generals quite as wretchedly dressed as was this mock officer whom they only knew as "Big Bandy," or the "Brigadier of Brimstone Butte."

And, though such was far from their intention when those laughing cries were uttered, one and all saluted this ragamuffin much as they might have saluted their old-time commanders when on dress parade.

At other times they were free with their jeers and jests, for Big Bandy was "soft," if not actually "simple," to use their own vernacular. But now—

"Ef he hain't bin high up, army-ways, afore he come-ye-so, then I don't know what!" muttered one of those passed in review to his mate.

"It jest sticks out all over him a foot!" was the low response.

Others seemed impressed after much the same manner, and what had started as a jest, turned to something like earnest, each old soldier keeping the alignment perfect while the brigadier passed through, his keen, soldierly eyes noting each figure and attitude. But when he paused at the other end of the lines, a clear, not unpleasant voice called out:

"Speech! Give us a bit of a talk, General Bandy."

"Them as needs it most is fu'st to holler, Green Gentry," nodded Big Bandy, his gaze turning upon the speaker—a tall, well-built, handsome man of middle age, with close-cropped hair, and a blonde beard that covered his swelling chest almost to the waist. "But they don't gin'ly git jest what they're axin' fer. So you. Whar did you sarve?"

"Under Stonewall Jack—God rest his soul!"

"Amen!"

Big Bandy doffed his hat and bowed his head in reverence for a few moments—an action which was imitated by all present at sound of that name, so justly idolized by all who wore the Confederate gray.

Replacing his hat and pausing before the man, Big Bandy added:

"You hed a good giner'l, comrade—none ever hed better. He was more fer good works than good looks; but even he wouldn't sca'cely pick you out as a model fer his foot-cavalry to go by on 'spec'tion day—one foot pushed ahead like a skirmisher, while t'other hangs back bummer-fashion. Then— What's the matter with your hands?"

"My hands? What do you mean?" ejaculated Gentry, lifting the members with an involuntary glance.

"Ketched 'em in your own pockets, that's all."

Gentry flushed with anger as his mates burst into loud laughter over the threadbare retort, but Big Bandy was graver than ever as he turned sharply toward one of the others, singling him out with eye and finger as well as by name:

"Let them laugh that wins the right, Jasper Naughton."

"What's the matter with me, Daddy?" quickly demanded the one addressed, his tall, soldierly figure drawn up for inspection, though there came a threatening glitter into his keen black eyes.

"What's the matter with a peacock when he spreads his tail wide open an' fergits his ugly, dirty feet? They wouldn't be nothin' the matter with you, outside, ef you'd spread all over ye the polish' you've piled up onto one single featur'," making mistake impossible by tapping his own nose as he nodded grave disapproval. "Best keep out o' the moonshine, Jasper Naughton!"

"You infernal old—bah!" with a forced laugh as he turned away with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"Twixt wind and water, both of us, mate," laughed Gentry, with a half malicious nod. "Out of the mouths of babes and idiots, you know!"

"He's more knave than fool, I'm thinkin'," frowned the younger man as they drew slightly apart, yet lingering to watch and listen to the dilapidated veteran, whose tongue seemed keener far than his saber.

"All the same, Naughton, he's a power in the land, and we're the fools if we don't make the best of it. Which side do you reckon he'll favor, of his own will?"

"You tell—I'll never."

Gentry frowned. Naughton mechanically fingered his highly colored nose, the only blemish to his otherwise handsome countenance. And as a shrill, high-pitched voice came to their ears from a platform some little distance away, their eyes met once more.

Big Bandy also caught the sounds, and his eyes wandered curiously in that direction, but before he could make a further move, Green Gentry stepped forward and spoke to the veteran:

"Only the skirmish line firing, brigadier, and before the big guns open—of course you're on our side, general?"

"Ef it's the right side, reckon I 'be, comrade; but—"

"Of course it's the right side. Do you reckon all us old vets would flock to the wrong side of the line, this late in life? No, sir! We'll vote as we shot, and that means a straight ballot for Carl Krishtner, our next sheriff!"

Big Bandy shrugged his shoulders, with a wry grimace.

"Smells kinder Dutchy, an' I never did go much on that scent; yit it's a man, not a name, that we want most jest now. Whar did he sarve?"

Gentry flushed a bit, for of all questions he had dreaded this the most, put in such company. For reasons of his own he was anxious to see this candidate for sheriff elected, and he knew that every vote counted where the chances were so evenly balanced. He knew, too, that the old soldier possessed a strange sort of influence over many men in that benighted region, and he was particularly anxious to win his support.

"Well, Krishtner did his duty, so far as sickness would admit, and he bore arms through—"

"The Home Guards—no less!" came a jeering voice from the outer edge of the little gathering.

"Good Lawd!" fairly snorted Big Bandy, his face the picture of supreme disgust. "Ef he was in the Petticoat Brigade, that cooks his goose fer me!"

"It's only a campaign lie, such as you hear at every barbecue in 'lection time," frowned Gentry, trying to spot the speaker beyond those lines. "Don't listen to all you hear, general, or you'll never git down to hard truth."

"That truth is plenty hard 'nough fer me," as his deformed figure drew as erect as possible, his dark eyes glowing vividly. "When a man comes 'fore the people to ax office, his record becomes public prope'ty, an' the lowest of us hes the right to 'vestigate into it. As fer me, they's only the one p'int to settle—did he do his duty?"

"All eyes can't well look from the same standpoint, brigadier."

"Ef they was to, this world 'd be too mighty good fer livin' into. I ain't axin' nigh so much. Ef a man fit ag'in me, good. Ef he fit shoulder to shoulder on my side, better. But ef he didn't fight at all, when the hull world was tryin' to do its duty, 'cordin' to the light it hed, then that man's like pussley—only fit fer hog-chawin', an' most mighty pore truck at that."

"But the sheriff we've got now is a Yank—blue-bellied at that!" frowned Gentry, adroitly appealing to the inborn prejudice which he understood so well. "He was forced upon us without asking would we have him or no. And now—it's our turn at last, and if we don't put in office a man who naturally represents us, then we deserve to live on as we have lived—worse slaves than ever were those of black skin and woolly skull!"

A growling, ugly cheer greeted this speech, and more than one threatening look was met by Big Bandy, as his eyes passed over the gathering, but he quietly waited until the sounds subsided, to say:

"Yankee or no, John Hooper fit hard, an' he fit well. An' what we call the right side, he called the wrong. An' while he does his duty as

well as he has done it, I ain't lookin' fer a better officer."

"What matter?" cried a harsh voice, its owner pushing forward as he added: "It's only a crack-brained looney— Hands off, cuss ye!"

He aimed a vicious blow at the face of the brigadier, whose big hands closed on his shoulders, holding him helpless despite his struggles, while he uttered in grave, even dignified tones:

"I wasn't always so, 'Gene Fuller. Once I was a hull man, but you—go your way, pore critter! You was born that way!"

CHAPTER II.

THE GENTLEMAN FROM KENTUCKY.

With the last sentence his voice and manner changed abruptly, and half in pity, half in contempt, Big Bandy flung the fellow from him, brushing his hands together as though they felt defiled.

Hardly more than a child in that mighty grip, Fuller spun around like a top, tripping over a mischievously protruded foot, falling in an awkward heap. But with cat-like activity he sprung up, cursing as he leaped back, an ugly blade glittering in his grasp, murder glowing in his wolfish eyes.

"Steady, man!" cried Gentry, leaping between the twain, an empty hand flashing before the ruffian's face. "Don't be a fool, Fuller. Put up your knife, or—you know me?"

"He wiped the ground with me, an'—"

"He'll paint it, too, if you crowd him too hard, 'Gene," with a short, metallic laugh. "Simmer, man!" his tones growing harder, his gray eyes glittering like steel mirrors as one hand closed on the fellow's shoulder. "The war is over. We came here to feast, not to fight."

"Ef you say so," mumbled the ruffian, reluctantly returning the weapon to the usual hiding-place. "But I'll even up with the crazy fool, ef it takes a lifetime!"

"They's a mighty wide range outside the barbecue grounds, an' time 'thout end," grimly nodded the brigadier, his nostrils quivering as with the loved scent of battle. "Mebbe I'm the fool he calls me, but ef he'd ruther die by a fool's hand then to wait fer the sheriff's rope, it ain't your uncle that's gwine to balk the critter."

"Gray hairs in the pates of both o' ye, yet one'd think neither had begun to sprout a beard, to listen!" laughed Gentry, who seemed bent on maintaining the peace. "Simmer down, or I'll cut a sprout and trim down both jackets—I just will, now!"

"Simmer down, an' take a drink fer to keep it simmered, gents," a husky, peculiar voice croaked as a new-comer pushed up closer to the principal actors. "An' ef anybody'll furnish the jug, I'll hold it level while the gents is wipin' off thar chins—yes I will, now!"

"Can you keep whistling while doing it, pardner?"

"Ef I kin jest wet my whistle once—jest once, as a starter" grinned the fellow, moistening his lips suggestively as one hand went out as though to grip the liquid receptacle. "A mellerer whistle you never did hear, ef I do say it my own self which didn't orter, mebbe. But—they's only one key that knows how to unlock my puckerin'-string; a key, with a whisk fer a handle to it. Ef anybody don't reckon I'm slingin' gospel at ye, jest try me a whack! Good Lawd!" with spluttering eagerness as Gentry produced a pocket flask. "Jest let me git my hooks onto it afore ye spill any, boss!"

"Sorry, stranger, but this isn't your sort of key. I never use it, because brandy suits me better."

"Holy smoke an' little angels swimmin' into it!" gasped the fellow, seemingly all on fire as he pressed still closer, his outstretched hand trembling with eagerness, his thick lips watering. "Is they sech a thing left in the land o' the livin' since the wah? An' me dyin' o' slow consumption jest fer lack o'—Giner'l, kin Ihev jest one weenty smell o' the cork when you'd t'other gents git through?"

If Gentry heard, he gave no heed, but pressed Big Bandy and 'Gene Fuller to drink together.

"Wash out all hard feelings, gentlemen. It isn't a day like this that should breed hard thoughts, and he who refuses, declares himself my bitter enemy."

"Decline? Who could do it? An' brandy—with a bead onto it wuss then—ah-h-h!" sighed the seeming bummer, smacking his lips and then wiping them languidly on a ragged sleeve as the flask passed from hand to hand until it returned to its owner, who gave it a shake that sent the remnant making sweet music to those attentive ears as he turned and swept a keen glance over the stranger.

Not a particularly pleasing sight, by the way, for his garments were little better than a mass of rags, while his frowsy hair and short stubby beard of rusty red were mixed with bits of grass and burs. Such of his skin as was visible called loudly for soap and water.

"A stranger to these parts, I reckon?" ventured Gentry, at length.

"From Kentucky, sah," with an elaborate bow. "Wish'd we'd met in the good ole times, sah, when I was—I really was, sah!—one of

the two-F-K's, sah! Whisky, an' nigger, an' brandy, sah; brandy 'till you couldn't begin to rest, sah! Now—jest Barney Budge, kivered with misery wuss then a army blanket, an' totin' more wowns than ever I hed gray-backs in the ole fightin' days 'long with Shelby—Giner'l Jo Shelby, sah!"

"You fought on our side, then?"

"I fit on the only one side they was, sah!" stiffly bowed Barney Budge. "I didn't re-cognize any other side then, nur I don't now, sah."

"Yet that side whipped us out of our boots!" grimly laughed Big Bandy, his curiosity plainly aroused by this gentleman from Kentucky.

"I deny it, sah," still more stiffly. "We whipped 'em, sah, but they was so mighty durn ign'ant that they never knowed it—wuss luck!"

There was such utter disgust crowded into the last words that even those who strongly entertained much the same sentiments, were obliged to laugh aloud. And with a proudly injured strut, Barney Budge was striding away from such unfeeling company, when Green Gentry checked him with out-thrust flask.

"Drain it, man," was his unnecessary advice as Barney Budge grasped the peace-offering. "And then, if your thirst is still acute, maybe you can win a full jug by out-pulling the candidates over yonder."

"Ef I could borry 'nough to enter, p'raps I mought—"

"All it needs is asking a chance. Krishtner puts it up, and—"

"Free? Good Lawd! let me—git out o' the road—you!" spluttered Budge, almost falling over his own feet in his haste.

This congregation—and it was a truly large one for that wild, thinly settled part of Missouri—was a typical one, and such as only the double attraction of a barbecue and a political meeting could be depended on to muster together. It brought out the bone and sinew of the country, together with the comparatively few who were, by common consent, still numbered among "the gentry." And if a man came without wife and children, it was simply because he was not so blessed by fortune.

Only in the far South, or in the Southwest, can these peculiar gatherings be found in all their glory; though the civil war greatly curtailed the old-time splendor and lavishness.

True, on this occasion there was nothing more important than the candidacy of two aspirants for the office of sheriff to be discussed, but partisan feeling had been diligently fostered and worked up until one would have thought the whole country was in danger. Tremendous efforts were made to oust the sheriff in office, and replace him by another more in sympathy with the voters, so far as his wishes during the war were concerned.

Sheriff John Hooper had fought through the war on the Federal side, and though he had been placed in office while the vast majority of the voters had been practically disfranchised, he had made a good and trustworthy officer. His army record was all that could be brought against him, while Carl Krishtner had been in sympathy with the South, though he lacked the physical courage of his convictions.

Only for this—only for his luckless connection with the so-called "Home Guards"—he would have had a walk-over. But with a "skulker" on one hand, and a hard fighter on the other, his friends knew a tough struggle lay before them.

For this reason Krishtner had poured out money lavishly, providing many sports and offering liberal prizes to the winners; liberal indeed to men who had been left literal beggars by the recent war.

Having sent Eugene Fuller away, and soothed down Big Bandy's ruffled temper, Green Gentry bent all his energies to winning the strange old fellow over to his side, yet adroitly covering his hook with such tempting bait as the occasion might offer.

He "steered" the veteran up against each contest in turn, cheering the deformed giant on, and boldly backing him against all comers with both words and money.

Fortunately for his exchequer, Big Bandy proved himself an adept at all of these, though his interest could hardly be said to grow full until he came to a portion of the grounds, apart from the speaking and dancing-stands, as well as the long trenches where fat shoats, plump sheep and quarters of good beef were being roasted, where targets were put up for rifle, musket and revolver shooting.

"Jest sniff o' that, will ye, man?" muttered the veteran, his nostrils quivering with a soldier's delight at burning powder. "Talk o' barbecue truck! That's the ginewine scent fer a man!"

"When burned by a friend," laughed Gentry. "But how about it when it comes from the front, as a tail to a lead comet?"

"Then it makes drunk come—an' it's the only stuff I know of that will, with a man an' a soldier. I live it all over when I'm sleepin' an' hav dreams. I kin hear the roar an' rumble an' crashin'! I kin see the men fallin' all ways for Sunday! An' then I know I was a hull man—then I know I was better'n the pore, crazy, crack-brained fool men p'int out fer to laugh over, like they do now!"

"And when you waken up, brigadier?" curiously eying the old man.

"Then it's gone—all but the faint echoes. Then I only know so much: that I went in with a musket, an' come out with a carver," Big Bandy frowned, dropping a hand on his saber with a force that caused the stained steel to rattle in its rusty scabbard.

This was hardly a mood to suit the schemer's purpose, and as the surest means of banishing it, he entered Big Bandy at each target, boldly offering liberal odds against all takers. And these were not few, for hardly a man present but prided himself on being a proficient with firearms, having been literally raised with a gun in their hands.

All gloominess fled from that scarred face, and for a time Big Bandy laughed and jested and chattered like a boy again. No feat seemed difficult enough to daunt him or to shake his nerves, for he was a "natural shot," and losing his wits had by no means affected his skill with gun or pistol.

Prize after prize was won, and though these were of little monetary value, or would be so considered in a more wealthy section, they rendered the veteran joyous to a degree, while Green Gentry chuckled in quiet satisfaction as he jingled the winnings in both pockets.

At length it was difficult to get up any test without barring Big Bandy out, and Gentry coaxed the veteran to another part of the grounds where "the gentleman from Kentucky," Barney Budge, was venting his prowess in loud if husky tones.

"Whar's the next man wants fer to break his back a-tryin' of the onpossible? Come in a platoon ef ye don't dast to come single, fer yan-der hangs the darlin' jug, an' the thrapple o' me jest parchin' into cracks wuss then a overflowed meader in the hot sun when the fresh has gone back home ag'in! Pull or beat the retreat! Last chainte, fer ef they ain't any more critters wants to git limbered up, I'm gwine fer to grab the jug an' hunt a good sleepy place fer a social drunk all by my own lonesome self! I jest be! An'—last call, gents, fer—"

"That jug isn't your sleeping potion until you've given my man a round, Mr. Budge," laughingly exclaimed Gentry, pushing Big Bandy forward, leaving him to confront the so-far victor in the old-fashioned "pulling-match."

With a half-vacant laugh the brigadier dropped to the ground and turned his big boots to cross the ragged brogans worn by Budge, at the same time grasping hold of the smooth hickory stick, close to the hands of his adversary, who doggedly muttered:

"Ef I bu'st ye wide open, 'tain't me, critter! It's the whisky!"

He made a desperate effort, hoping to "pull up" Big Bandy before he could fairly settle down to work, but in this he failed. And then their muscles swelled, their sinews strained, until—Big Bandy suddenly flung himself backward, gripping the stick as though his hands were riveted to it, fairly flinging Barney Budge over his head, frog-like, just as a wild alarm broke forth from some little distance:

"A fight! A fight!"

CHAPTER III.

A TRICK, OR A TRAGEDY?

"MOTHER! Myr' Ellen! Ef it don't take you wimmin-critters longer to git ready to do nothin', then I wouldn't say so!"

Luke Barnes stood leaning against his work-team, hitched to the unpainted, rattle-trap of a farm-wagon, and though there was a smile on his gaunt visage as it turned toward the house, there was a touch of irritation in his slow, drawling tones that brought forth a hasty answer:

"I'm comin', father. It's Myra Ellen. Takes her longer to do nothin' when they's a hurry like—oh, dear! whar is my—"

Luke Barnes drew a long breath that was almost a sigh as he gave the up-climbing sun a glance before slowly climbing to a seat in the wagon. The first barbecue of the season, and late, even before starting!

"Ef I hedn't bin cheated out o' my clean rights, mebbe 'twould 'a' bin dif'rent," he muttered, his frown deepening and growing blacker as he moodily eyed his gaunt, work-worn horses. "Mebbe I could 'a' rid in my buggy an' fast critters like—Talk o' the devil!"

Almost savagely the last words were bitten off as he stood erect to add the evidence of his eyes to that borne by his keen ears.

There came the distant clatter of trotting hoofs beating on the sun-baked road, sounding not unlike the rapid roll of a snare-drum, but growing clearer and more distinct until, even before they came into view along that forest road, Luke Barnes had no difficulty in recognizing the well-matched team which was filling his mind's eye at the very instant he heard them first.

"Look, dug-gun ye!" the farmer growled, barely above his breath, sinking back upon the springless board which served him as a seat. "An' mebbe ye'll take it out in lookin', too, Gil Cochrane!"

A span of matched bays came swiftly around

the turn, drawing an open buggy in which sat a single person. They seemed fiery creatures, but just then their owner, Gilbert Cochrane, was paying them little attention beyond keeping taut reins.

His tall figure was drawn erect until it seemed as though he must be rising from his seat, and he was gazing intently toward the humble home of the Barnes's. Only until he caught sight of Luke alone in the farm wagon; then he settled down and deftly made the sharp turn into the narrow, rough lane that led up to the front of the building.

"Morning, neighbor!" he called out, cheerily, as he drew up near the other team, then quickly doffed his hat as Mrs. Barnes and her daughter Myra emerged from the log-house. "Your servant, Mrs. Barnes—Miss Myra. Bound for the barbecue, of course?"

"Ain't any law ag'in' that, is they?" frowned Luke Barnes. "Climb in, mother, an' you, Myr' Ellen. Time we was thar, an' hafe-way back ag'in, ef we want to hear—so!"

The wagon creaked dolefully as Mrs. Barnes climbed in, turning a cold shoulder toward young Cochrane, who had hastily alighted to lend his assistance. But before the younger woman, her cheeks flushing and paling by turns, could imitate that vigorous action, Cochrane hurriedly offered her a seat in his buggy.

"For once—will you not make me happy, Myra?" he added in a tone that was far from steady, his strong fingers pressing the mitten-wrapped hand which he had deftly intercepted.

"Don't—father wouldn't—" she murmured, a shy, frightened light in her blue eyes.

"May I take Miss Myra to the grounds, in my rig, Mr. Barnes?" the young man asked, his dark eyes glowing and his brows wrinkling with more than anxiety as he awaited the response.

It came, slowly, with deliberation, but the hastiest speech could not have contained more that was unfavorable.

"You go your way, an' we'll go ours, Gilbert Cochrane. I ain't plum' a beggar yit, ef you hev branded me as a squatter."

"Put it straight, Luke," with a forced smile. "I've told you time and time again that the deeds are waiting your taking, whenever you say the right word. Why not make a beginning now? Let me escort Miss Myra to the barbecue, and then this evening you and I can come together and talk it over on equal terms. Bend a bit on your side, man, and—"

"Stop right whar you be, Gilbert Cochrane!" flashed the squatter, his hot temper at length breaking through the dull, sluggish exterior which seemed part of his being. "I'd ruther yank the tongue out o' the jaws o' me than to let on they was any question o' rights an' wrongs about the hull matter. The prope'ty is mine, a'ready!"

"Then all you've got to do is to present your proofs, Barnes," laughed the younger man, assisting Myra to enter the wagon, resuming his former air of almost painful politeness as he added: "Will you favor me, Mrs. Barnes, by accepting a seat to the grounds? The road is rough, and my buggy—"

"I've got a man o' my own, Gil Cochrane!" curtly interposed the farm-wife. "If I hadn't, 'taint one o' your name I'd be pickin' up ef they laid thick as crooked sticks. Go on, father!"

Luke Barnes, after a backward glance to assure himself that both women were safely seated, started his team down the lane, without giving a single glance toward the young man who had received such a rebuff. But Gilbert Cochrane only smiled, possibly because he saw Myra shyly wave her mitten-wrapped hand behind the broad back of her unsuspecting mother, then hide her sweetly blushing face in the depths of her freshly starched sun-bonnet, like one frightened by her own boldness.

He entered his buggy, following the farm-wagon until out of the lane and into the main road. Then, taking advantage of a point where the road broadened, he drove alongside, speaking quickly:

"Try to look at more than one side of the question, Barnes, and I've little fear but what you'll come to see I've my rights, as well as yourself."

"Yours, an' mine too, dug-gun ye!" flashed the squatter, showing his teeth savagely. "I'll stop short o' nothin' but right. When you're ready to 'low me that, come ag'in. Now—pull out, or I'll take a wheel off! You cain't juggle the law o' the road, anyway!"

A touch of the silk sent the trotters ahead, and Gilbert Cochrane sent over his shoulder:

"The deeds are ready and waiting for your taking, Barnes. It only asks one little word to turn 'em over."

"May ye never sleep easy ontel we say that word, Gil Cochrane!" sharply cried Mrs. Barnes, her face flushed with anger.

"Mother—on the public road, where—please hush!" murmured Myra, her face burning, her bright eyes dimming with tears of mortification and—was it regret?

"Hush you, 'stead o' hush me!" retorted her mother, but settling herself to a more comfortable position, now that the object of her anger had fairly vanished around the nearest turn in

Big Bandy.

the road. The idee! *His comin' like that to ax—long o' him? Ketch me!*"

"I'd ruther ketch ye ridin' with the Old Boy himself, mother," said Luke, with a guttural chuckle as though he saw something amusing in that grim conceit.

"You're jest a heap more apt to, anyway."

"If—can't it be settled some way, father?" timidly ventured Myra, leaning forward until a hand could lovingly rest on those bowed shoulders as she added, hurriedly: "It's making you grow old before your time, daddy! It's killing you by inches! If it might only be settled so that—"

She broke off abruptly as Luke Barnes turned sharply, his eyes glowing angrily as they scanned her fair face. And there was a touch of suspicion in his tones as he harshly spoke:

"You heard how he wanted it settled, Myr' Ellen Barnes. Would ye like it smoothed *that* fashion? Ef you're my da'ter, talk out!"

"Not that way, father, but if you could only—if you could only prove your rights!"

"I axed ye, Myr' Ellen, beca'se I wanted to know if the old stock was clean run out. I axed ye beca'se, though you're the only child I've got left, an' one I love heap sight better'n I do my own self. Yit—ef you was to say what he wants ye to—ef ye was to even *hint* that you'd marry 'long o' him fer sake o' gittin' back the property that I've done paid fer once out o' the sweat of my brow an' the ache of my weary bones, I'd— Git up, cuss ye!"

The dust flew from where the tough gad fell, and the gaunt old horses broke into an awkward trot, the rattle of the worn-out wagon effectually putting an end to all conversation.

Myra Ellen bowed her head and turned it aside to avoid the keen glance of her mother's eyes. She did not wish to talk, nor did Mrs. Barnes offer to continue the subject. It was a painful one for all of the family.

Years before, when Myra was but a child, and the mutterings of a coming war hardly reached that remote region, one Kenneth Barbour had owned nearly one-half of that entire county, almost a king, after his simple, rustic fashion.

Luke Barnes was very poor when he married, as most of his neighbors were; but he worked early and late, saving every penny he could do without spending, hoarding them up until they grew into dollars, then proudly paying the first installment on his farm to Kenneth Barbour.

And as the years rolled by, he paid more and more, until at last the entire sum had been delivered, when Barbour gave him the papers that made him owner of his hard-earned home.

A prouder man never drew the breath of life that day! But with that night came fresh trouble. What if aught should happen to those precious papers? What if fire should destroy not only his humble log-house, but wipe out the sole proof of his ownership as well? And as the wakeful nights began to tell on the simple fellow, he took his troubles to Kenneth Barbour, who accepted the care of the deeds, at his urgent desire, saying that he would have them recorded, when all would be safe, even should the deeds themselves be lost or destroyed.

Doubtless this pledge was sincerely given, but times were growing more and more troubled, and Kenneth Barbour had much else on his mind. And when the fateful gun was fired, the rich man was among the first to rush to the front, there to fight for his convictions.

So too went Luke Barnes, leaving his wife to fight her fight at home. And it was not until the terrible war came to an end, that anything was said about the deeds on which his little all depended.

Kenneth Barbour never returned to his nearly ruined home. Men said that he had been killed in battle, far away in the South. Some named the very battle in which he had gone down with so many more of his brave comrades. Others said he had been caught and shot as a spy.

Only one thing was certain: he never came back to claim his own, and after many long months, Gilbert Cochrane, as the son of the one-time wealthy land-owner's sister, came into possession.

He took complete charge of the vast estates, and finding many old soldiers who had "squatted" on the land without right or title, he set about removing them, thus adding to his unpopularity as one who had fought through the war on the Federal side.

Among those who could show no legal title was Luke Barnes. He told his story, but when the records were examined, no proof could be found to back up his statement, and he was duly notified to vacate.

This was before Gilbert Cochrane saw Myra, or he might have acted with more lenience; as it was, when the mischievous little god of love fell to work, the harm was already wrought. And he only made a bad matter worse by bluntly offering to give Luke Barnes a clear title if he would coax Myra to become his, Cochrane's, wife.

"Give me my bounden rights fu'st," was the dogged reply, and to that Luke Barnes stuck, from that day to this.

He was pondering gloomily over all this as he

drove along, and heeded not the quick crashing amid the dense underbrush, until a startling object sprung out into the narrow road directly in front of his frightened horses: a horse and rider, but such a rider!

More like a bloody corpse than a living man, bound to the saddle with face turned to the rear, and with the carcass of a dog hung about his neck.

"Good Lawd! it's Sheriff John Hooper!" ejaculated Luke Barnes.

CHAPTER IV.

ALL FOR A WOMAN.

In his amazement he sprung to his feet, calling loudly, and, as though frightened afresh, the strangely-laden horse gave a sharp snort and plunged across the road, quickly vanishing amidst the underbrush.

"Ef I ever see sech a— What was it, father?" cried Mrs. Barnes, grasping an arm with such energy that Luke dropped back upon his seat and lost the lines as his frightened team sprung forward in a clumsy gallop.

"Whoa! let go—whoa, dug-gun ye!" spluttered the farmer, breaking away from that startled grip just in time to snatch at the lines as they slid forward. "Stiddy, boys! One'd think—Ketch hold, mother, an' I'll go see what—"

"Don't ye—help hold him, Myr' Ellen!" spluttered his better-half, flinging both arms around his waist and almost suffocating him in her energetic fears. "I won't hev ye meddlin' with—if I ever did!"

"Do you think—was he dead?" panted Myra, tremblingly. "What can it all mean?"

"It means—wist I knowed—no, I don't, nuther!" said Luke Barnes, drawing a long breath as he swept an arm across his beaded brow. "Git ap, critters!"

"But—surely we ought to—can't anything be done for the poor man, father?"

"I reckon he's already done fer!" grimly muttered Barnes, using the whip and urging his team on, instead of lingering. "Shet up, both o' ye!" with unwonted sternness in face and voice, as he flashed a dark glance backward into their pale faces. "Tain't our mixin'. We hain't got nothin' to do with the likes o'—the like o' *that*, I mean."

"But he may be dead—dying!"

"I tell ye shet! Hain't I got trouble 'nough to bend the back o' me a'ready, 'thout huntin' up wuss? Shet, an' keep tight shet. I mean it, both o' ye. An' ef you don't want to put on the cap-sheaf, you'll never open the head o' ye 'bout what ye think ye seen back yen' ways."

"Didn't I see it with my own two lookin' eyes, Luke Barnes?" indignantly spluttered his wife, only to be coldly met with:

"I reckon ye thought so, but I know better. We never none o' us saw anythin' out o' the common. Ef you hold out we did, then it's turn right back fer home this very minnit!"

There was a brief silence, and Luke Barnes gave his horses a jerk that set them to cramping the wagon preparatory to turning about in the narrow road, when Mrs. Barnes faintly mumbled:

"Mebbe I didn't—don't turn back, father!"

"An' ye won't even whisper the ghost of a hint in the crowd at the barbecue? Mind, it may mean bitter black trouble fer me ef ye do," was his earnest warning.

The pledge was given, though only a woman who has lived a dull, lonely, monotonous life for years can fully appreciate the sacrifice thus demanded. But, when once extorted, the pledge would be religiously kept.

"But—afore we git furder—wasn't it the sheriff, father?"

"Sheriff or governor, saint or devil, dead or livin', tain't none o' our doin's, nur none o' our business. Shell I turn back?"

"No—I've bin lottin' on the barbecue so long that—I'm shet up tight as wax, father," sighed Mrs. Barnes, resignedly.

Less than an hour more brought them to the grounds selected for the barbecues and open-air political meetings from time immemorial, and letting his women climb to the ground unaided, like a true-born Missourian, Luke Barnes drove to a convenient spot for hitching, or unhitching rather, leaving the animals to pick at the coarse hay with which the wagon-bed was filled.

A strong politician, as most of his kind are, Luke lost little time in securing a place where he could drink in the speeches, Mrs. Barnes and Myra bearing him close company, as in duty bound.

As stated in another place, this was "the first gun of the campaign," and though the most important office to be filled was that of sheriff for the county, the interest felt could hardly have been greater had the balance of the globe depended upon their votes; had it been a presidential election, the candidacy for sheriff would have overshadowed the higher office entirely.

Carl Krishtner, the candidate of the Confederate element, was present, with a number of able backers, but as yet Sheriff Hooper had not put in an appearance, though this was published as a joint discussion, where the voters might

have a fair opportunity of expressing their choice for the office.

Luke Barnes was quickly absorbed in the speech-making. Mrs. Barnes tried to feel the same interest, but after recognizing some neighbors, her attention flagged, wavered, ceased entirely; and whispering something about wishing a drink of water, she stole silently away from the side of her husband, leaving Myra to keep him company.

But even where political excitement forms almost the only topic of conversation, as in that portion of Missouri those days, a maiden who is still in her teens, can hardly spend a day in listening to dry if fiery talking; and as Luke Barnes had clearly forgotten her very existence, and her mother was no longer to be seen, Myra silently stole out of the crowd, to catch a free breath of the bracing October air.

"Where is Sheriff John Hooper?" came hoarsely to her ears from the stand where a red-faced man was vigorously sawing the air. "He promised to be here, to face the hot shot which our noble candidate is only waiting to pour into his—his ranks, so to speak. Where is he, I ask you again, fellow-citizens? Where? Where he was when grand old Pap Price, Van Dorn, Jo Shelby and their gallant lads in gray were on hand: *taken to the brush!*"

"Do you care to listen to such bombastic trash longer, Miss Myra?" whispered a well-known voice close to her ear, and unheeding her instinctive shrinking from his touch, Gilbert Cochrane slipped one of her hands through his arm, leading her quickly to a spot where a little clump of trees and bushes would hide her from her parents' eyes, should they remember her existence inconveniently soon.

"I ought not—this is wrong, Mr. Cochrane," murmured Myra, her fair cheeks flushing painfully as she tried to free her hand from his warm, almost fierce pressure.

"Naughty, but nice," he laughed, softly bending his proud head until the primitive sun-bonnet could no longer cheat his hungry eyes.

"I ought not—I do not wish to walk with you, Mr. Cochrane," she persisted, her voice growing a bit steadier as her spirit rebelled against this masterful possession.

"Must I lose my only chance of setting myself right in your eyes, Myra?" he said, softly, but with a touch of proud anger in his tones as he released her hand, putting his own behind him, the better to resist temptation. You know how often I have tried to see you at your own home, but—"

"Why do you keep claiming that it isn't really our own home?" the girl flashed, her eyes glowing brightly as they firmly met his gaze. "You call it that now, but when father speaks, you tell him he is a cheat, a robber, a— Go away, and let me be, sir!"

"Will you not listen to me, Myra?" casting a swift glance around to make sure no other ears were inconveniently near. "You know I'm fairly dying for love of you, little girl, and—"

"Yet you are keeping us out of our rights, all the same," was the swift retort, and she gave no signs of fully comprehending the confession he had just made.

"You have only heard one side of the story, Myra," was his grave response, though he plainly found it no easy task to hold his hot passions so well in hand, with that bewitchingly charming face so near his own, its beauty only deepened by the shade of the bonnet. "I'm not blaming you so much for feeling hard toward me, remembering that; but if you would listen to my side of the dispute, you could judge better."

"I only know that you are demanding pay for land that father has once paid full price for," obstinately.

"So he says, but—well, you know, even the best of men are apt to make mistakes when their interest is deeply concerned, and your father may have mistaken his rights."

"Do you dare accuse him of willfully trying to swindle you, Mr. Cochrane?" slowly asked Myra, her eyes glittering ominously.

"No, I do not," almost doggedly, yet barring her way when she made as though to brush past and leave him. "All I claim is that he shows no proof to back up his claims."

"You know how those proofs were lost, when—"

"When Uncle Kenneth went to the war, leaving his papers in charge of Uncle Jupe, his body-servant—yes," nodded Cochrane, with just the ghost of a smile playing about his firm lips. "I've heard it all, and hope time will solve the mystery. Yet, Myra, proof or no proof, all may be well with your father if he will only meet me half-way. Let him say but a single word—with your sweet promise to back it up, dear girl—and the deeds for the farm shall be placed in his hand that very moment!"

"That word will never pass his lips!" flashed the maiden, quickly.

"Give me your promise, then, and—"

"Never, sir!"

"Do you mean all that, Myra Barnes?" slowly demanded Gilbert Cochrane, his face pale as that of a corpse, though his black eyes filled with a red glow that seemed to scorch where his gaze fell. "Do you hate me so utterly as all

that would imply? Is my love worse than nothing to you? Must I bury my last fond hope?"

"You are my father's bitterest enemy, and—I must go, before—"

Her agitated speech died out, and she shrank back with an audible breath as a tall, athletic figure abruptly broke through the fringe of bushes screening them, while a stern voice uttered:

"Your mother wants ye, Miss Myra, an' I'm come to take ye thar."

The love-light fled from those black eyes, and Gilbert Cochrane swiftly stepped in front of the maiden, facing the intruder, at whose face he did not need to glance twice before recognizing a rival.

"Many thanks, Jasper Naughton, but this lady is in my company, and if her mother wishes her presence, I'll escort her without troubling you further in the matter."

"Did ye hear, Myra?" persisted Naughton, without even glancing at that angry face, though he must have seen it, and ought to have recognized that danger-signal as he looked beyond to where the frightened maiden was shrinking back. "Your mother sent me to fetch ye to her, an' I'm only waitin' fer ye to say ye'll go long o' me."

"Keep on waiting, since you can't take a plain hint, Naughton," sneered Cochrane, turning to offer an arm to the frightened girl.

"Stiddy—you!" grated Naughton, his hot temper flashing forth as he caught his rival by the proffered arm, swinging him around until they stood face to face once more. "I was talkin' to the lady. You've got no right to lip in, Gil Cochrane!"

His own hands were tightly clinched, and his athletic figure was plainly braced to meet and overcome an attack; but his rival smiled in cold contempt as he saw as much.

"Early in the day for one of your size to be drunk, Naughton, but on no other grounds can this conduct be excused. Go your way and hunt a place to grow sober in, before you insult a lady by breathing in her face!"

"Ef you say I'm drunk, you lie!" flashed Naughton, his clinched hand drawing back for a blow; but still Cochrane made no move that could possibly be caught at as an excuse for personal violence, and his tones were cool as ever when he spoke again:

"If not drunk, so much the worse, for it brands you as a coward. There is a lady present, and you know no gentleman will fight in such company. Come, Miss Barnes; permit me to escort you to your mother."

"Hands off, Gil Cochrane! You stole her home, an' now you want to steal the gal, but—Coward, liar, hog-thief!"

The last foul epithet was still hot on his lips when Cochrane wheeled and sent out his fist at the same instant. And Jasper Naughton went down before that blow, falling like a dead man!

CHAPTER V.

HOT HEADS AND HEAVY HANDS.

WHETHER or no the passing years has wrought a change in that respect, is not the question. At the time treated of, throughout the South and Southwest, particularly in the mountainous region of Missouri, no more deadly insult could be offered than to apply the epithet of "hog-thief" to another man. And so well was this fact understood that no man gave the insult without holding himself in readiness to back it up by force of arms.

No man living was more thoroughly versed in these unwritten laws than Jasper Naughton, and driven on by a blind, unreasoning jealousy, he caught at the surest method of bringing his rival down to his own level, caring nothing for appearances, only thirsting for revenge on the proud, rich, arrogant man who bade fair to overturn all his secretly cherished plans for the future.

Hence it was that the plainly inappropriate epithet was given, simply because that meant fight without further delay.

And with almost any other man, Jasper Naughton would have gained at least an even start, for he was an adept at "shedding his linen," to use the vernacular, and even the hottest fighters "in that neck of woods" were accustomed to more or less tongue-lashing before the climax was reached.

But Gilbert Cochrane had been bred in a different school, and struck as he whirled, his hard-clinched fist landing squarely between those glowing black eyes, the weight of his muscular body backing up the blow. And with a hoarse, broken cry, Jasper Naughton was lifted clear off his feet and sent backward to the hard ground, with a thump and a shock that shook his every bone and muscle.

Myra gave a sharp scream of fright as she saw that fierce stroke, and without waiting to see it take effect, she fled at top speed in the direction of the speakers' stand, where she ran blindly into the arms of her father, who, with the rest, sprung into action the instant there rose the thrilling cry:

"A fight! A fight!"

"Look out for her, mother!" cried Barnes,

sending Myra into the arms of his wife without stopping to fully interpret the broken, agitated words which dropped from the scared girl's lips.

"Don't—Stop them! They'll kill—Oh, mammy!" with a painful sob as she hid her fear-blanchèd face in that expansive bosom, shivering like a terrified kitten. "Take me home—take me home!"

Instinct seemed to warn Luke Barnes, if not to tell him just what had happened, for he ran swiftly to the very spot where that insult had been given and been so promptly avenged. His gaunt visage was pale as its natural and acquired swarthiness would admit, and his pinched nostrils quivered sharply as he caught sight of Gilbert Cochrane standing on guard with a gleaming knife held in front of his breast, watching his rival, who had just regained his footing and was brushing a hand across his temporarily blinded eyes, while with the other he was drawing a heavy revolver from its scabbard at his hip.

Many others were crowding around the rivals, and Cochrane sharply called out:

"Let him come, gentlemen, if he hasn't got his fill so soon!"

"Whar is he? I'll hev his heart's blood fer that lick!" hoarsely panted Naughton, seemingly bewildered by his fall.

With a bound Luke Barnes gained his side, knocking the revolver upward, then wrenching it from the infuriated man's hand before he could realize what was intended.

"Stiddy, boy!" sharply breathed the squatter, eluding a savage blow by jerking his head swiftly to one side. "Cain't ye tell yer fri'nds from the enemy?"

"Hold, ye hot-heads!" came a voice of thunder, and scattering men to either side in his resistless rush came the Brigadier of Brimstone Butte, his drawn saber sweeping through the sunlight to knock the glittering weapon from the hand of Gilbert Cochrane. "Kick up a riot, will ye? Simmer down, or by the blood o' Stonewall Jackson, I'll hev ye both bucked and gagged!"

Cochrane instinctively tried to regain his knife, but that ugly looking sword barred his way, and even his anger was not blind enough to make him rush upon that point, backed as it was by the enraged eyes of the mad hermit.

There was a brief silence, during which matters appeared to be at a dead-lock, and no one seemed to know exactly how it should be broken, until the clear, ringing tones of Green Gentry rung out:

"Bar the tools, and I'm open to lay odds on Jasper Naughton!"

There was a rustle among the crowd, and the voice came again:

"Money talks, and I'm its prophet! Two to one Naughton can lick the Yank clear out of his leather!"

"Make a ring and let 'em fight it out!"

A dozen voices caught up that cry, and as if by magic a rude sort of ring was made by the eager men, leaving only the principal actors in the center.

"Git out o' that, Luke!" cried a neighbor. We don't want no killin', but it'd be a mighty pity to cut the fun short, now it's started. Skin out an' let 'em chaw each other up!"

Big Bandy had turned aside to pick up the knife which he had knocked from the hand of the young land-owner, and was inspecting the really curious weapon with childish delight at its beauty.

Luke Barnes saw that he could hope for nothing in that direction, and doggedly spoke up for himself.

"What's the racket about, anyway? Ef it comes o' what I fear, I'll not hev my—"

"It's jest between him and me, Barnes," quickly interposed Cochrane, with a warning gesture that checked the squatter's further words. "I chanced to step on his pet corn, and he insulted me. I knocked him down, of course, and—"

"He hit from kiver—cuss him!" gratingly exclaimed Naughton, beginning to recover from the stunning effects of that blow. "He's a sheep-killer an' a hog-thief, an' I kin walk his log thout hafe tryin', ef ye'll make a line he cain't break through to run away!"

"Gray ag'inst the blue ferever!"

"Climb all over him, Missouri!"

From every side came cries of similar nature, and Gilbert Cochrane must have been blind as a bat not to have seen how few were his friends among so many enemies. But that proof only served to cool his overheated blood and to steady his nerves.

A sneering smile curled his lips as he flashed a keen glance about him, and no mortal could have betrayed less fear than he as he quickly spoke:

"I can and will prove him a liar, foul as the epithet he has just mouthed, if you gentlemen will show me fair play. Is that asking too much of old soldiers, even though we fought on opposite sides?"

If he had studied over his speech for an hour, Gilbert Cochrane could not have chosen his words better. They touched the honor which forms part of every veteran's character, and had he been doubly as bitterly hated by those

about him, from that moment he was safe against anything like foul play.

"Git out o' the road, Luke Barnes!" growled Naughton, flinging the muscular squatter aside and tearing off his own coat as he added: "I don't ax nur need no help, dog-gun ye, Gil Cochrane! I kin walk yer log an' never know I'm doin' of it only fer the stink it raises! I kin—"

"Stiddy, you!" sharply uttered Big Bandy, his saber flashing in front of the angry fellow's face, causing him to draw back and mechanically lift an arm as a guard. "Ef notbin' but a troucin' ll suit ye, Jasp Naughton, take it in jue order an' man-fashion, whar the wimmen folks won't be skeered too bad by yer howlin' let up."

"Take the crazy fool away, some o' ye!" growled Naughton, but making no attempt to assail this blunt speaker. "I don't want to hurt him, but he mustn't crowd in whar he ain't wanted."

"I'm backin' Gil Cochrane, ef he'll hev me."

"And more than glad to accept your kind offer, too!" quickly cried the one named, knowing right well that he might hunt the whole crowd over without finding another friend so influential, madman though the brigadier was popularly supposed to be. "I leave it all in your hands, General Bandy. All I ask is that we may get down to business with as little delay as may be."

A faint, uncertain cheer arose at this bold yet cool speech, and Green Gentry, seeing that his chosen champion was only losing ground with delay, also pushed the preliminaries as much as lay in his power.

Long before this every person on the grounds knew that a fight was brewing, but however great their curiosity might be, the women made no effort to see or hear more, as a rule content to wait for the story at second hand. And the men, forgetting the speech-making for the time being, surged apart from the grounds devoted to that purpose, quickly forming a ring in a more retired portion of the forest.

It was taken for granted that only nature's weapons were to be used on this occasion, and that Big Bandy, with Green Gentry, were to act as seconds, or "best men," to use the local term. Their main duty was to make sure that both men were without weapons, and that no outside interference took place before one or the other of the principals should admit defeat by "hollerin' enough!"

"A lovely tool, Mr. Cochrane!" exclaimed Gentry, admiringly as he held up the knife which Gilbert had drawn to meet the attack of his rival. "I'd feel tempted to steal it, but for your name engraved on the blade—I really would, sir!"

"Aint it?" echoed Big Bandy, temporarily forgetful of his duty, yet with a trace of perplexity in his manner as he gazed at the glittering blade. "Never seed a finer bit o' steel, an' yit—pears like I've met up with its dead mate, sometime, somewhar—it jest do, now!"

"Time is passing, gentlemen," coldly but impatiently said Cochrane. "You can examine the weapon all you like, after this bit of pleasure comes to an end."

"Ax him to leave it to ye in his will, pardner," laughed Naughton, who seemed even more anxious to fall to work than his rival.

The disarming was quickly effected, the men removed their outer garments, then stood opposed to each other, models of muscular power and pantherish activity.

There was nothing to choose between them as to height or weight, and though the resemblance had been noted on more than one occasion, never before had their faces looked more exactly alike, as they stood foot to foot, lightly sparring for an opening. Had they been twin brothers the likeness could hardly have been more remarkable in all respects.

The eager witnesses were granted scant time to note or make comments on this resemblance, however. Cool as both men seemed, outwardly, each was burning with a fierce, deadly rivalry, each was eager to settle forever their claim to supremacy. For each felt that to the victor in this struggle must belong that glorious prize—the hand and heart of fair Myra Barnes!

Jasper Naughton made the first positive move, following it up with a vicious storm of blows, before which Cochrane broke ground, deftly guarding himself, keeping his head despite the derisive laughter and enthusiastic cheers which came from those whose sympathies were with the man who had worn the gray. For they, like Naughton, knew little about the niceties of the art, and counted on one bull-like rush to end the struggle in their favor.

Naughton only sought to inflict, not to avoid, injury, and having a fair knowledge of the science, Cochrane found it easy to send in an occasional "hot shot," each blow leaving its mark in unmistakable characters. But though his face was quickly a mask of blood, Naughton never once ceased his endeavor to close, and by taking heavy punishment, he at length succeeded.

"Now I hev got ye!" he savagely growled, straining every nerve for the fall which should place his rival wholly at his mercy.

For fully five minutes—seeming hours—that fierce struggle lasted. Then, with a sickening force, the antagonists fell to the ground sideways, neither having the advantage.

CHAPTER VI.

"KILL ME, OR I'LL KILL YOU!"

THERE came a sobbing gasp as the thrilled spectators relieved their lungs, for while that fierce, deadly wrestle lasted without success perching on either shoulder, hardly a breath was drawn by one of those present, so intense was the suspense.

Involuntarily the ring contracted, men surging forward, or being crowded out of place by those in the rear, less favorably situated for seeing what was now transpiring since the rivals had both fallen.

"Keep your places, gentlemen!" cried Green Gentry, vigorously pushing back some of the foremost. "Fair play—and plenty of room, as ye are white men!"

"Back, ye hot-heads!" thundered the brigadier, drawing his saber and making it whistle through the air in swift, awesome circles and curves close to those excited faces. "Back, I'm tellin' ye, all! Back, or by the grave o' Jackson! I'll split ye into one-legged half-men!"

Less fierce threats would have answered just as well, since not one of those present would have disgraced himself by openly interfering with the combatants. One and all knew and respected the rules, and brother would have fought brother rather than stand by and see him violate them, even to assist the champion of them both.

"Back—quit scowdgin'!"

"Kneel down in front, so all kin hev a see!"

"Form to receive cavalry!" cried one veteran, and as one man the inner ranks dropped to their knees, leaving a clear view for those in the rear.

All this passed with marvelous rapidity, and so severe had been the shock of their fall, that the rivals still lay side by side, their arms and legs still interlocked, their chins resting on the other's shoulder, just as they had come to the ground together.

This much all could see, but the keen eyes of Big Bandy saw more than that, and a spasmodic smile flitted over his scarred face as he huskily muttered to Green Gentry:

"All over but hollerin', comrade! Look at your man!"

"*Luck* did it, not *your* man," savagely growled the sporting man, his eyes as brilliant as his face was pale.

For he, too, saw that in falling Jasper Naughton had struck his head against a dirt-covered root which rose in a snake-like curve several inches above the level; saw, too, that though Naughton was stubbornly resisting the efforts made by Cochrane to "turn him," his strength was not equal to the task.

Neither had the younger man escaped that terrible fall without harm, though the shock had only driven the breath from his body, lessening his strength and partially stunning his brain. But from this he was rapidly rallying, and feeling how much was at stake, his entire energies were brought into play.

Desperately as Naughton fought, that blow had handicapped him too heavily, and Cochrane slowly but surely rolled him over on his back, then contented himself with doing no more than was necessary to maintain the advantage he had gained, knowing that while he was rapidly regaining his wind, his own weight was oppressing the lungs of his rival.

"Toss him, Jap!" cried Gentry, sharply, knowing that only by using his utmost powers now could Naughton hope to save himself.

"Stiddy yer grip, comrade!" trumpeted Big Bandy, not a whit less interested, though outwardly cooler than his fellow second. "Every hump he makes takes jest so much tuck out o' the critter! Stiddy goes, an' it's all over but hollerin'!"

"Stick to your knitting, Jap!" repeated Gentry, his eyes on fire, his long mustache fluttering with his hot, quick breath.

All this was breath spent in vain, for neither encouragement nor depreciation was heeded by the rivals. Better far than those who thus sought to lend them aid, they realized what victory or defeat meant on that occasion. They were battling for the greatest prize young men can know, and either would have chosen death before defeat in such a cause.

Desperately Jasper Naughton strove to throw off that crushing weight, or to slip, eel-like, from beneath his rival. His brain was all awhirl. His eyes blinded. His labored breath seemed to take the skin with it as it forced a way through his throat. His sinews strained and cracked as though he was on the rack. But through it all he struggled against fate.

Cooler, yet none the less resolute, Gilbert Cochrane made the most of his advantage, putting forth just enough strength to foil the wishes of his rival, waiting with deadly patience for the moment when he might clinch his victory beyond a doubt.

Surely as Big Bandy warned him, he knew

that each effort made by Naughton was bringing the end nearer, and with that assurance he could well afford to ignore the taunting remarks which began to come from the lips of those among the gathering who would have yelled with pure delight had their favorite filled that role.

There is a limit to mortal power, and Jasper Naughton quickly reached his, thanks to his blindly directed efforts. He ceased to struggle, with an involuntary groan.

Gilbert Cochrane felt his lungs collapse, and that told him his time had come at last!

With a quick, fierce jerk he broke away from that death-grip, and though Naughton immediately resumed his vain fight, he lay comparatively helpless beneath his rival, whose knees were not long in pinning each arm to the ground as their owner sat heavily across the body of his antagonist.

With fingers interlocked about the brawny throat of his rival, Cochrane panted, exultantly:

"Beg, Jasper Naughton! Beg for mercy, or die like the foul-tongued cur you showed yourself a bit ago!"

"Beg—notthin'!" came in a hoarse gurgle as those bloodshot eyes glared defiantly up at that pale, victorious face.

There was an uneasy stir among the witnesses, and more than one ugly murmur rose on the air, plainly in sympathy with the under man. And one voice cried out:

"Give him a chance! You never done it—twas the root his head hit when he downed ye, Gil Cochrane!"

"That's so! Jap kin walk his log ef he hed fair play!" chimed in another harsh voice.

"Stiddy, all both o' ye," sharply cried Big Bandy, his dark eyes flashing ominously as he turned, saber bared in his grip. "Bite yer tongues of ye cain't keep 'em silent any other way. Who put the root thar? *My* man didn't, an' ef *his* hed bin the head to hit fu'st, you'd jest be slobberin' all over with pure delight—yes ye *would*, now!"

"Let 'em up an' try it over ag'in, ef your man is good as ye seem to think, Big Bandy!"

Through this interchange, Gilbert Cochrane had relaxed his deadly grip, which had lasted hardly an instant, for he had only meant to show his antagonist how completely he held him at his mercy.

He cast a quick, contemptuous glance over those threatening faces, and at that last speech he cried out:

"If I was the under dog, would you ask the same favor for me, Dan Freesole?"

"I'd see ye furder fu'st—an' then I wouldn't, Yank!" was the honest, if impolitic response.

This drew a short burst of laughter from some of those hard by, but it had its effect in recalling the men to their rustic sense of fair play, though so differently intended.

Even Cochrane smiled, though after a very grim fashion. And then he turned his attention once more to his comparatively helpless rival.

"Do you ask it, as a favor, Jasper Naughton? Shall I let you up and give you another chance?"

There was no reply in words, but the desperate man tried his level best to fling off that burden, only ceasing when his strength once more failed him.

"You're a whiter man than I gave you credit for, Naughton," said Cochrane, with a hard, grim chuckle as he again relaxed his grasp. "I thought you just hog enough to take a favor from your master's hand."

"Kill me, or—I'll kill you!" panted the under man, viciously.

"Is that your tune, Jasper Naughton?" laughed Cochrane, his face anything but handsome just then, so full was it of remorseless hatred and savage resolve. "You're not broken in yet, so—beg, you foul-mouthed cur!"

His tight-clinched fist was raised above that purple face, seemingly in readiness to descend with brutal force on those unguarded eyes.

Again those menacing sounds broke forth, but Cochrane never turned a glance in that direction. He knew that he was safe from any actual interference, for the unwritten rules of "rough and tumble" permitted him to use any and all means of conquering an adversary, except artificial weapons. Hard words were all that could be brought against him from the outside.

His fist descended, but only to rub its knuckles mockingly across the face of his enemy as he laughed scornfully. The heaviest of blows could not have hurt one-half as badly!

"You've got to come to your fodder, Naughton," he laughed, easily resisting the desperate struggles of the overmatched man. "Beg for mercy, and you'll have more sunlight to show you a hole to crawl into where decent men will not be affronted by the sight of your face. Beg, or—what would you do were I in your place, Jasper?"

"Kill you!" viciously gasped the other, overpowered but still undefeated. "Kill you—hog thief!"

Swift as thought Cochrane twisted two fingers in a lock of hair growing above Naughton's temple, then rested the nail of his thumb in the hollow between nose and eye, fiercely saying:

"Say you're a whipped man, Jasper Naughton, or—out goes one of your windows!"

"It's a dug-gun shame!" indignantly cried Luke Barnes, yet unable to interfere, so all-powerful is unwritten law.

"Will you beg for him, Mr. Barnes?" quickly spoke Cochrane, a queer smile flitting across his pale face. "If you will—"

"See ye double-over durned fu'st!" was the harsh reply.

"Another hope gone glimmering, Jasper," chuckled the victor, turning back to his adversary. "Now—I can pound your face until your boasted beauty will never come back again. I can put out your light and so reduce you to begging for your bread—unless you prefer to adopt the honorable profession you accused me of following: stealing fat hogs for a living!"

"Kill me—I'll never beg! You can't begin to whip one side o' me, durn ye, Gil Cochrane!" sullenly panted the luckless man.

"If you had the same power, what would you do with it? Let loose, and beg my pardon for proving yourself the best man?" mockingly. "If you had your thumb in my eye—so! what would you do?"

"Scoop it out, an' wish't you hed a thousan' to serve the same way!"

"I don't doubt it, Jasper Naughton," was the cool retort, his manner abruptly changing, his voice growing graver, even dignified. "And that only goes to prove the difference between a gentleman and a cur."

"I could pound you to a pomace. I could gouge out your eyes, and leave you a miserable wreck. Not a hand would stretch out to save you from this. Not an honest man would dare say I had overstepped the limits set by the very code to which you and your friends appealed. But—luckily for you, Jasper Naughton, I am a gentleman!"

With those words Gilbert Cochrane sprung nimbly to his feet, leaving his rival free to arise, saying:

"I show you this mercy, because I know it will shame you even worse than to cry for pity, Jasper Naughton!"

"Kill me—I'll kill you!" groaned the man, staggering, to his feet, groping blindly about with wildly clutching hands. "Gi' me a weapon, somebody! Gi' me—a weepin' weapon, somebody! Gi' me—now I've got ye, Gil Cochrane!"

"It's me that's got you, Jasper," sternly cried Big Bandy, his arms closing with a mighty grip about the infuriated fellow.

CHAPTER VII.

A PERSISTENT LOVER.

WITH hardly an effort that could be recognized, the brigadier lifted Naughton clear of the ground as he made that rage-blinded rush at his rival, handling him with an ease that bore witness to the marvelous powers stowed away in that deformed body.

"Stiddy, boy, an' larn to peddle! You're licked, ef you don't know it. So whar's the sense o' tryin' to kick furder?"

"I ain't licked! He cain't begin to lick one side o' me! I kin walk his log—an' all his backers at the same time!" raged the maddened man, desperately striving to break away from that bear-like embrace.

"Say ye kin!" chuckled Big Bandy, giving Naughton a toss that landed him on his feet a dozen feet away, dizzy and uncertain-eyed. "Waal, Jasper, ef you cain't help fightin' somebody, s'pose you make a startin' with your Uncle Fuller?"

Grinning broadly as he whirled his fists round and round, like a boy who has heard of but who never saw sparring, Big Bandy still kept his stand between the rivals, his clumsy antics bringing laughter from all sides. And before Naughton could fairly collect his wits, Gentry and Barnes were at his side, each bent on preventing further trouble, at least until their friend was better able to "hold up his end."

Gilbert Cochrane was standing at ease, ready for what might turn up, cool and seemingly wholly recovered from his desperate struggle. His black eyes never left the face or hands of his rival, and had Jasper Naughton succeeded in snatching the weapon he fiercely demanded, he would have found a willing adversary for either bullet or steel.

With a swift stride forward, the young man pushed Big Bandy aside with a hastily muttered:

"I'm not asking your honest body to hide behind, brigadier. If that isn't all wind, I'm ready to repeat the lesson."

The last sentence came in clear, distinct tones, and even in his madness Jasper Naughton could not help hearing and understanding its full meaning. And it seemed to calm his blind rage wonderfully, though no one who knew him at all could charge him with fear of mortal man.

"Crow while you kin, Gil Cochrane," he said, his voice hoarse and hardly recognizable. "You didn't lick me. You couldn't make me holler. But I'll do both to you, sure as the sun shines up yender!"

Cochrane laughed shortly, both face and voice full of contempt.

"I'm willing to leave the question for all who looked on to settle, Naughton. You picked the quarrel. You'll have to take the first step again if we ever have another racket. But—maybe you'll catch me in a less merciful mood the next time!"

"Off hands, you two!" growled Jasper, trying to free himself from the grip of the friends who were urging him from the scene of his defeat, before still worse should come to him. "D'ye hear him crowin'? Let up, I tell ye! I'll lick him or die!"

"You're not fitten, Jasper," hurriedly said Barnes, as he and Green Gentry slowly forced the young settler back. "That root knocked ye out o' time, an' ontel that heals up—"

"I'll git even with ye yet, Gil Cochrane!"

"All right, Naughton," was the cool retort, "I'll never go out of my way to mix in a row, but I'll always try to hold my end level when crowded."

Satisfied that the end had come, for that day at least, Cochrane was quietly putting on his discarded garments, outwardly one of the coolest men on the grounds, only his unusually pale face showing the terrible strain he had undergone during those few minutes.

Jasper Naughton ceased his vain efforts, and permitted his friends to lead him away to the not-distant stream of water, where his cuts and bruises might be cared for, his slow, unsteady steps, his relaxed muscles, his drooping head, all showing how severely he had been punished, though, by far the worst was due to his unlucky contact with that root-curl.

Although the victory was clearly unpopular, a goodly number of men hung around to watch the conqueror, exchanging whispered comments on the recent fight, but probably Big Bandy was the only one who really gave Cochrane full credit for his work.

"I never thought it was into ye, young feller," the brigadier said as he offered his services in dressing his principal. "An' though I was backin' of ye up, in a manner o' speakin', I'd be tellin' a lie ef I was to say I wanted ye to come out on top."

"That's all right, general. I'm standing on my own bottom, and ask no man to side with me. If I can't hold up my end, the sooner I know it the better."

"That was it, fu'st off, ye know," nodded Big Bandy, his still keen eyes passing admiringly over that compact yet active figure. "It seemed like the gray ag'in the blue all over, don't ye see? An' ef I hev come out with the brain o' me left ahind, I cain't holp 'memberin' that I fit fer the side I felt was in the right."

"The war is past, general; don't let's bring it up again."

"Don't I know?" with a little sigh, his scarred face growing graver. "We fit you'-uns all we could. But—we got licked out in the eend, an' that's the wu'st anybody kin say. So now: Jasper fit his best, but he hed to go down. You hed him licked, ef you didn't make him holler 'nough. An'—mighty quar! Giner'l Grant was jest that same way with Giner'l Lee! Must run in the breed—must b'long to the color, I do reckon!"

Cochrane turned his face aside to conceal a smile as Big Bandy heaved another troubled sigh. Friends were not so plenty in those days that he could afford to openly offend even this poor, witless fellow.

"An' me a-waitin' an' a-waitin' an' a-lickin' the lips o' me all this lonesome while, keepin' the flies off o' that blessed jug!" came a doleful whine in a husky voice as Barney Budge shuffled forward to shake an accusing finger in front of that scarred face. "An' you off yar, lettin' the precious minnits run to waste, an' never keerin' ef some durned thief did run off long o' that prize which I'd won afore you come to send me playin' frog a mile or less! An'—say, boss," in coaxing tones, "I know I ain't a patchin' long-side o' you, but I'll try ye 'nother whack ef you'll promise me jest one weenty swaller fer my tumble!"

Big Bandy stared blankly at the fellow, at a loss to comprehend his meaning for a time, but then, as the sport-loving crowd cried out for him to give the gentleman from Kentucky another toss, he grinned broadly and permitted them to lead him back to the spot where the "pulling up" had been conducted.

Gilbert Cochrane was nothing loth to be left alone, and replacing the knife which had so attracted the notice of both Green Gentry and Big Bandy, he slipped around under cover until convinced that he was no longer being watched.

He could see nothing of his recent adversary, nor of Luke Barnes, but he was not long using his eyes before he caught sight of Myra Barnes, beside her mother, near where their rude vehicle stood waiting.

He frowned a bit as he saw how jealously the elder woman seemed guarding her child, but he knew, too, that he had no right to hope for anything better.

"I'll never have a fairer chance, after this," he muttered to himself, a dogged resolution coming into his pale face. "The old lady can't accuse me of skulking, anyway."

He passed around under cover until he could approach the wagon from the rear, though he

knew from past experience that Mrs. Barnes was far more likely to show fight than to beat a retreat. And before even Myra could suspect his vicinity, he stood before her, his head bare and humbly bowed as he spoke in subdued tones:

"I come to humbly beg your pardon, Miss Barnes, for—"

"Git out—you!" spluttered Mrs. Barnes, startled by his abrupt appearance into waving her arms, much as she might have done in shooing an impudent chicken.

"As soon as I have discharged the duty a gentleman owes a lady for permitting her eyes to witness a blow in anger, Mrs. Barnes," bowed Cochrane, a touch of dignity mingling with his humility.

"A gentleman don't crowd in whar his comp'ny isn't wanted, Mr. Cochrane," stiffly retorted the elder woman.

"You are very hard on me, my dear—"

"Ketch me!" with a flush tinging her honest face. "I'm dear to only one man, an' he is a man, which you ain't, an' never will be while you hold down the right an'— Will you quit, Gil Cochrane? or must I go 'way my own self?"

If she only would!

And, afraid lest she should read that ardent wish in his eyes, the young man made haste to say:

"I must beg Miss Myra's pardon once more, though I think she will do me the justice to say that I tried all any gentleman could to avert a quarrel in her presence."

"You did—it was his fault that—"

"You shet, Myr' Ellen!" sharply interjected her mother, but to this too persistent lover: "When you do what's just an' hon'able an' right, Mr. Cochrane, I'll listen to ye an' welcome. But until that time comes, the less you hang 'round me or mine, the less apt you'll be fer to lose what good looks you lay claim to. Come, Myr' Ellen!"

She turned away with an angry flounce, but—did Gilbert catch a ray of hope in that shy face? He tried to hope he was not mistaken, and with audacious resolution he caught her hand, speaking hastily, so wholly in earnest that he cared little whether Mrs. Barnes heard him or not:

"I love you, Myra, better than all the world besides! I'll try to win your love in return, and never abandon hope while your name remains Myra Barnes!"

"You My'rellen!" cried the scandalized mother, snatching the girl's hand and hurrying her away, giving a gasp of great relief as she caught sight of her husband approaching the wagon.

Gilbert Cochrane saw the same figure, and by no means desirous of widening the breach still further by chancing a quarrel with the father of the maiden he loved so ardently, he walked quickly away from the spot, mechanically guided by the jolly sounds which came from the place set apart for the "pulling up" matches.

When dragged laughingly back to that point, Big Bandy had once more cast aside the somewhat pompous dignity with which he was wont to drape himself on state occasions, and laying aside his army overcoat, tenderly placing belt and saber upon it, out of harm's way, he gazed blandly around while Barney Budge busily called upon another champion to step forward and be downed.

"Fer down he'll come, like a mountain o' brick, a'ter takin' a frog jump that'll make his heels shiver fer fear o' gittin' barked ag'in the stars! Waal, don't I know? Didn't I try it my own unlucky self? An' me that was never throwed afore by fo' legs, let lone two?"

A fire of jests ran through the jolly crowd, but no one appeared to contest with the brigadier. The short, burly bummer had proved his supremacy in a physical point of view over several of their picked men, and all had seen how easily Big Bandy disposed of his pretensions. Not one among them all cared to risk the ugly fall.

Barney Budge heaved a mighty sigh, then dropped to the ground and grimly gripped the stick, dolefully saying:

"I'll break the fool' neck o' me in ninety pieces, but—I jest got to hev a smell o' that jug—I jest hev, now!"

Big Bandy, a boy among boys, showed no reluctance, and hardly had their positions been taken, than Barney Budge went sprawling over that white-crowned head, to lie like one stunned for several moments. But the instant he was able, he scrambled up and snatched at the jug, which had just returned to Big Bandy—to give a howl of despair as he found it empty!

"Kin I— Whar's the cob? Kin I jest hev one suck at that?" he whined, when a loud roar broke forth, mingling with the snort of a frightened horse, as a strangely-burdened animal came tearing through the grounds.

CHAPTER VIII. A SHERIFF IN HARD LUCK.

"HOLY smoke! it's a dead man ridin'!" cried one pale-faced fellow as he caught sight of that strange rider, then fairly tripped himself up in his haste to clear the way.

It was indeed the same thrilling vision which had so shocked the Barnes family while on their

way to the barbecue, and bold men though they were, nearly every one tried to escape from, rather than to arrest the tortured horse with its uncanny burden.

Not so Big Bandy. He sprung to the head of the animal as it came dashing past, and with one hand gripping its nostrils, his other arm closed about its neck, his whole weight bearing that head downward even as his bony fingers shut off its wind.

Gilbert Cochrane sprung to the brigadier's assistance, after which there was no lack of aid. And the horse was held quiet while others started to release its rider, dead or living.

"Sheriff Hooper! Who could 'a' done it?"

"A devil's doin's, anyhow!" growled Big Bandy, as he received the limp figure in his arms when Cochrane cut the stout ropes which bound him to the high-horned saddle. "Somebody's got to pay for this!"

"Back—give him air, ye fools!" thundered Cochrane, striking and pushing vigorously to keep a clear space. Do you want to be mixed up in a foul murder like this? Back, I say!"

This was no easy task, willing though those nearest might be, for already the strange tidings had spread through the grounds, and nearly every one was crowding around, eager to see and hear for themselves.

"You look to him, an' I'll open a way," said Big Bandy, reaching the spot where his arms had been placed, then keeping an open space by the fierce flashing of his bared saber.

Even as Cochrane cut the dead dog loose from about the neck of its master—for the little Scotch terrier was almost as well known as was the sheriff himself—he saw that the luckless man was still living, though terribly worn by his inhuman treatment.

Using water and whisky freely, Cochrane soon had the pleasure of hearing Hooper gasp, and seeing his lids lift from the bloodshot orbs beneath, and he soothingly said:

"It's over now, friend, and you'll be all right in a few minutes."

A motion of the parched and bleeding lips was readily interpreted, and Gilbert quickly held a flask so that the exhausted man could drink slowly. The first drops seemed to choke him, but after a fit of coughing, he swallowed more freely, and soon gave signs of restored strength by lifting himself to a sitting posture.

This brought his eyes upon the carcass of the dead terrier, and a hoarse, choking sob rose in his throat as he panted:

"Him, too! Little Sandy! Wasn't it enough—Hell's blackest curses on their heads! I'll—I'll—"

"Only name the fiends who dared do such a dastardly deed, and all the county will stand to your back until they're punished!" sternly cried Gilbert Cochrane.

"What is it? Who did it? Was it just a trick, or—"

"A trick?" harshly laughed Hooper, staggering to his feet and searching for the man who uttered those hasty questions.

"Was it a joke, or simply a trick to carry the sympathy of the voters?" bluntly persisted the speaker, who was one of the men brought to the barbecue to electioneer for Krishtner.

"Only a fool or a knave would ask such a question as that!" hotly cried Cochrane, also rising. "If you had seen this poor fellow—"

"Poor enough, officially speaking," sneered the other, turning away without waiting for reply or action.

He was shrewd enough to know when he had said enough. Already more than one of the crowd was gazing suspiciously at the blood-marked face of the sheriff, and here and there an ugly jeer was finding life.

"The hoss made a mighty straight shoot fer help, anyway!"

"Now look fer them as helped him set up the trick!"

"Durned smart, but too thin fer to blind them as hes jest got tha'r eyes open to even smoother tricks!"

And so the taunts went the rounds, drawing those bloodshot eyes after each fresh speaker, while the misused man shivered with impotent rage, too nearly exhausted by his terrible ordeal to even answer those brutal shafts.

"They're heap sight too many in a bunch, lad," warningly muttered Big Bandy, who seemed unusually shrewd that day, for one who was universally accounted an idiot or a madman. "Wait fer a better time. Wait ontel the sheriff kin tell his side o' the story."

"A joke, they call it, eh?" huskily mumbled Hooper, steadying himself by a hand on that strong young arm, gazing around on the lines of faces, winking rapidly as though hoping to thus clear his blurred vision. "It'll be a joke that'll cost more'n one life if I can—"

His husky, uncertain speech broke off with a groan of impotent rage and despair as he not only failed to recognize the face he hoped to find, but heard as well the bitter words of mockery which were now being poured upon his "vile trickery" from the speakers' stand.

Truly, his opponents were losing no time!

"Let 'em croak, sheriff," soothingly uttered Big Bandy, slipping a supporting arm around the swaying figure. "The truth'll come to the

top in the eend, an' it'll count all the heavier on your side fer the ugly words them hired talkers is spittin' forth jest now."

At best this was but poor comfort, but Sheriff Hooper was in no fit condition to make a fight just then, even with his tongue armed by the foul injury done him. And with hanging head he permitted his two stanch friends to lead him apart from the crowd, where he would stand a better chance for recovery.

A number of curious fellows bung close to their heels, until the brigadier put them to flight by savagely threatening them with his drawn saber.

So far these rough, half-civilized men were in accord with the red Indians: they held one deprived of his wits sacred from physical harm.

The unlucky sheriff was led to the creek near the point where the rivals had fought, and there the two friends did what they could to restore his shattered powers, asking no questions until he was ready to volunteer the information which, naturally, each was burning to learn.

Even then he told his story in broken, disconnected snatches, for when his weakness did not interfere, his growing rage brought about a break; but before an hour had elapsed from the time of his rescue, he had given them a fair idea of how his misfortune had been brought about.

As that, with other events which had and were yet to transpire on this day of jollification, was fated to bear close relations with the grim tragedy which was even then impending, it may be as well to give his story in condensed shape before going further.

As stated, John Hooper was a candidate for re-election to the important office of sheriff—doubly important in that wild, lawless region, where the arm of justice needed the strongest hand it could bring to bear.

He had proved himself an honest, fearless, energetic officer ever since his appointment, which took place shortly after the close of the civil war, when Missouri, together with other unfortunate sister States, had to be ruled by a mailed hand.

The worst of his labors was connected with the illegal distilling of whisky, and his vigorous efforts to put this down, quickly brought him into bad odor with not only the actual law-breakers, but many others who held that each man had a right to do what he pleased with the fruits of his own labor.

Many a fierce threat of killing had gone forth against him, and more than once he had narrowly escaped losing his life on that account. But every such attempt only made him the more resolved to perform his sworn duty to the best of his ability.

He was still in office when the practical disfranchisement of hundreds of voters in his county was lifted, and though he knew his re-election would be hardly less than a miracle under these changed conditions, he put forth his claims, resolved to fight his enemies to the last moment, rather than even seem to yield to their boasts and threats.

Thus matters stood when the day for the barbecue and the great political meeting—the "first gun" of the campaign—was set.

He told how, against the advice of his best friends at home, he had started to keep his appointment to address the voters of that remote section, starting the day before, in order to be on the scene in time to do a little "log-rolling" on his own account.

He knew that Gilbert Cochrane was politically his friend, and had rimed himself to reach his house before dark, at the latest; but as he was jogging along on a lonely road, lost to all else in arranging the points which he hoped to make in his speech, he was suddenly attacked by masked men from ambush, and overpowered before he could draw a weapon or strike a blow in self-defense.

He had no time to recognize any of his assailants, the attack was so well planned, and so swiftly executed, but, afterward, he heard more than one voice in speech or laughter which might possibly afford a clew to the dastardly ruffians.

That was indeed the mildest epithet that fitted them, for they treated him with barbarity as his condition when rescued, long hours after his release from their pitiless hands, went far to prove.

They bound him securely in the saddle, face to the rear, putting a gag between his jaws. And then they killed his pet dog, hanging it around his neck. For, as he heard one of them say, with a vicious laugh:

"They're sech good fri'nds, 'twould be a pity to separate 'em, even in death!"

"I'd know that voice again, if I could hear it in a laugh!" John Hooper said, his voice stronger, much of his physical powers having returned under the care of his present friends. "I'm 'most sure, now. I was looking for him back yonder, but I didn't see—"

"Who was it?" asked Cochrane, curiously, but Hooper made no reply.

He was leaning forward, his eyes glowing redly, his hands tightly clinched, his attitude that of acute listening. And as they mechanically imitated his action, they heard that sound

repeated; a short, mocking laugh which both men readily recognized.

"I knowed it!" fiercely panted Hooper, springing to his feet, staggering away in that direction before a hand could be lifted to stay his rash movement.

"After him, comrade!" muttered Big Bandy, only pausing to catch up and buckle on his saber. "He'll need help ef he means to tackle that brash critter!"

"Was it—who was it laughing?" hesitated Cochrane.

"Jasper Naughton, no less!" was the grim response as the brigadier strode in pursuit of the sheriff.

"Wish't I could 'a' seen the show!" Naughton was saying, with another hard laugh as he added: "Two dogs on one hoss! An' the dead cur was heap sight the best o' the couple, too!"

"Jasper Naughton!" cried a hoarse, yet cold voice, causing the man with sorely battered face to wheel suddenly, hand on revolver-butt, to see the sheriff drawing near.

"Got 'nother trick ready to spring onto us sap-heads, Hooper?" he recklessly jeered, seemingly inviting an attack which would afford him a fair excuse for using his weapon.

"I know that laugh—I heard it when your gang downed me, Jasper Naughton!" sternly cried the officer, still advancing, though his hands were empty. "You were one of them, and I'll pinch you despite all your law-breaking gang! You're my—"

"Hands off, John Hooper!" striking the fingers from his arm and springing back a pace, his bruised face glowing with anger. "Show your warrant, or I'll kill—"

"I don't need any, Jasper Naughton. You're my prisoner!" steadily spoke the sheriff, still advancing.

"Hands off—fair warning!" harshly cried Naughton; then, as the sheriff persisted: "Take that much of me, if you will have it!"

Sheriff Hooper fell like a log before that fierce stroke.

CHAPTER IX.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

GENERAL BANDY stretched out his arms, but was not near enough to save the weakened sheriff a heavy fall on the hard ground. He stooped to pick the officer up, flashing a look of mingled scorn and anger into that bruised face as he cried:

"That was a coward's blow, Jap Naughton!"

"I give him fair warnin'. I axed to show his warrant. I said keep all han's off, or—an' I say it to the rest o' ye, gentlemen!" his fierce tones taking on a vicious echo as he held his revolver once more in readiness for use in case he should be crowded.

"You couldn't help seein' that he was too clean plum' wore out fer to do more'n stan' up alone," sharply added Big Bandy, while his hands were equally busy over the sheriff, who lay as though deprived of life. "An' so I say it in the teeth o' ye, Jap Naughton—the one who'd hit a pore critter like that, 'd take a club to a blind cripple!"

"Your tongue's no slander, Big Bandy, an' so—"

"What he says, I repeat," coldly cried Gilbert Cochrane. "It was the act of a cowardly ruffian, and if Sheriff Hooper will appoint me his deputy, I'll make the arrest for him."

"You?" with a harsh, forced laugh, as he turned an ugly look upon the last speaker. "You couldn't arrest one side o' me, Gil Cochrane!"

"Hold your place until Hooper can speak. Then, if he makes me his deputy, I'll take you, living or dead."

Clear, cold, even that speech, but all who heard it and saw that pale, handsome face, knew that, let what might be the consequence, Gilbert Cochrane was in deadly earnest; that there was not even the ghost of a boast in his words; that if the order was given him he would make his threat good, or fail only because of his own death.

Even Naughton seemed to realize this; though he stood his ground boldly enough, pistol in hand, plainly longing yet hardly daring to make use of the weapon so long as his rival stood with empty hands. If he would only draw knife or pistol!

"Play he'd p'nted ye deputy, then. Come an' take me, Gil Cochrane—pull your gun an' take me—if ye dare!"

Cochrane was already bending over the sheriff, who was recovering the senses, briefly lost through that blow and fall combined, and taking advantage of this fact, Naughton was once more taken away from the scene of his friends, Gentry and Barnes, each of whom seemed to have a strong interest in his welfare.

"Say the word, and I'll arrest him for you, Hooper," hurriedly uttered Cochrane, noting this movement on the part of the enemy.

For a single breath the sheriff hesitated, then a groan of angry despair broke from his lips.

"No—what use?" he said, in husky, trembling tones. "I couldn't prove it against the cur. I only heard his laugh. I didn't even see his figure. So—but I'll even up if it takes a lifetime!"

"Fooled ag'in!" coarsely laughed one of those attracted to the spot by the prospect of a row. "A bag o' wind, an' none too mighty sweet at that. Eh, neighbor?"

"That's what! Let's go hear Krishtner punch a hole through it."

A combined cheer and peal of laughter came from the ranks before the platform where the new candidate for office was standing, mercilessly scoring the "dirty trickster" who dared hope to cast dust in honest eyes by posing as a martyr!

Sheriff Hooper groaned again as he heard this, for his night of torture had brought his physical powers very low indeed, while his mind had suffered far more than words can tell.

"They've done the job for me, Cochrane. I'll never be able to show my face in company again. I might as well throw up the sponge and let the devils have a clear field, first as last."

"Never say die, comrade!" cheerily cried the brigadier, while Gilbert Cochrane slipped a supporting hand through his arm, slowly leading the broken man away while speaking:

"General Bandy is right, sheriff. Never say die! Don't let those rascals have the pleasure of even thinking they have broken your spirit. Face them now, even as you did in the old army days; fight 'em from start to finish, and we'll come out on top at last!"

"I can't—they'd laugh me out of my seven senses," groaned the despondent officer. "It's a dead dog—Curse them!" with sudden fury as that word recalled the faithful creature who had served him so long and so truly. "They even had to kill the puppy! They wouldn't spare even little Sandy!"

"It was a vile outrage, from start to finish, Hooper; but who can say? It may turn out to be a boomerang in their hands! It may carry you into office again, like riding a wave over a mud-bank!"

"Not here—not in this rebel stronghold," was the despondent response, both men for the moment forgetting that one was with them who had borne arms on the other side. "If an angel should come down to bear me out in my story, those devils wouldn't believe—they'd stick to what is being said even now—listen!"

From the speakers' stand there came to their ears words of mockery and jeering, mixed with fierce denunciation. Carl Krishtner was scorning his rival and pandering to the old war spirit at one and the same time.

"Will you give your suffrages to such a man?" he was saying, when one of the crowd, more enthusiastic than lettered, yelled forth:

"You jest bet we will! All the suffrages he wants, an' heap sight mo' too!"

"For, if you do elect him, friends and fellow-citizens, the first new expense to be saddled upon you, overburdened and cursed with taxes as you already are, will be a new seal to adorn his office. A seal fit to commemorate the shameful trick by which he has this day sought to cheat a noble, unsuspicious constituency. A seal which, to my notion, precisely fits his own condition at this identical moment; a dead cur trying to ride into office 'round the neck of a live jackass!"

Carl Krishtner knew his audience thoroughly. He knew they wanted strong meat, and he gave it to them according to his ability. And he felt exceedingly well satisfied with himself and his prospects, as he bowed deeply, then fell back amid a perfect hurricane of cheers and yells and bursts of laughter.

The three men had listened to this brilliant peroration, and now Gilbert Cochrane turned to Hooper with blazing eyes and low, almost fierce tones, to mutter:

"Will you answer that rascal, sheriff?"

Hooper shook his head, holding out his scratch-ed hands, trembling with physical exhaustion, before saying:

"You can see—I'm not fit. I'd make matters still worse by breaking down or—I dare not, Cochrane!" his bloodshot eyes catching a brief but savage glow. "I'd kill the first cur who flung a taunt in my face! I'm that played out!"

"Then—keep him back, brigadier," nodded the young man, striding forward and springing upon a stump only a few rods from the platform, throwing up a hand and calling out sharply:

"Is this meeting like the handle of a jug—all on one side, neighbors? Are you afraid to listen to one who may stand on the other side of the fence?"

"We are here to unite in a full and free discussion, Mr. Cochrane, and are more than willing to divide the time with our opponents," was the prompt response from the platform. "If we haven't done so up to this moment, it is simply because no one has seen fit to put in a claim, not because we fear aught he, or you, or any other gentleman on that side of the fence, may have to say."

"Whar's the sheriff? Shove him up whar all kin see, an' let him 'spain how he come to rig up a turrible sell like that!" called out a jeering voice from the crowd.

"Order, gentlemen!" interposed the master of ceremonies, then turning with a bland smile to the young man on the stump: "Be pleased to

step this way, Mr. Cochrane, and speak from the rostrum."

"Thank you, sir, but I must decline. I don't think I'm over proud, but I'm clean. And being so, I'll never put myself on the same footing as Carl Krishtner: a man only in the clothes he wears!"

"At least, I wear no dead dog about my neck!"

"So much the more room for the hangman's rope, if a creature can be found degraded enough to fill that office with such a poltroon," sneeringly retorted Cochrane, proving himself able to fence with dung-fork or rapier. "Never fash yourself, Dutch Carl; we'll come to the dead dog all in good time, but it's an older tail I mean to wag before this audience, first."

"Men who handle pitch, can't expect to keep their hands clean. He who plays with fire mustn't howl if he chances to scorch his fingers. And he who begins a battle of filth, must expect the wind to blow more or less of the stuff back into his own eyes. So—since you have made this a personal campaign, here's at you, Carl Krishtner!"

"Who is John Hooper? A man who had the courage of his convictions. A man who proved his right to that title by offering his life in defense of what his conscience told him was right."

"The meanest sort of a Yankee, sense he was Southern born an' bred!" called out a rough voice from the crowd.

"It's plain enough to see which side you fought on, Marvin," nodded Cochrane, with a pleasant, if short laugh. "Did you fight fur blind love of battle, or was it because you deemed your cause a holy one?"

"I knowed it was—an' I know it till yit, dug-gun ye!"

"Of course; you wouldn't be half the man you are if you didn't. And that's just what was the matter with Sheriff John Hooper. He felt that his side was in the right. He enlisted for the war, bearing a musket, until hard fighting earned for his hand a sword. His conscience told him he was right."

"Then it told a dug-gun lie!"

"From your standpoint, perhaps, but not from his. And as his conscience dictated, just so he fought until the end came, though in so doing he knew he was bringing about his material ruin. He knew that his property would be destroyed. He knew that he was leaving his family—and one who wore the blue could feel as deeply, love as ardently, as one who wore the gray, gentlemen! But though he knew all this, he stuck to what he felt, right or wrong, was his sworn duty.

"That he fought as best he knew how, let the many scars received in battle bear witness. That he was no coward, more than one within sound of my voice this moment can testify, for they met him where the bullets flew thickest. And so, an humble hero, he fought on until the unhappy war was ended. And then, like an honest man, he forgot and forgave.

"This, in brief, neighbors, is the record of Sheriff John Hooper during the war. He went in private, and he came out colonel. He went in poor, and came out still poorer. He performed his duty while under fire, just as he has performed it ever since, without fear or favor, obeying orders without stopping to count the cost. If he had been more politic and less honest, perhaps there wouldn't have been such fierce opposition to his election this day. If he had been more of a politician, he might have had many more so-called friends. But he had his sworn duty to perform, and those who are wickedest best know what a terror he has been to all evil-doers!

"So much for an honest man; now for the other side of the fence.

"While John Hooper was fighting for what he held to be right, where was the being who stands in opposition to him in this campaign? Where was Carl Krishtner when the Confederacy for which he pretended to heartily sympathize was calling in her last agonies for recruits?

"Nobly shedding his blood in the petticoats of the Home Guards! Gallantly fighting under the gaudy banners of the Paw-paw Militia! Ay, fighting—his fears! Raiding—the hen-coops and turkey-roosts of those men who had gone to fight even more dangerous enemies! Retreating—from the scolding women who chased him and his ilk with mop and broomstick! And if any of you wish to know just how fast he could run—from the enemy—look at his bald pate! He fled so fast that the brush just snatched him baldheaded!"

CHAPTER X.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

AMIDST a perfect storm of yells and laughter, Gilbert Cochrane bowed, then left the stump, knowing when to stop.

He was satisfied with his effort, for he knew his audience thoroughly. He knew that they could better appreciate the lusty blow of a club than the neat thrust of a polished rapier, and he had catered to their needs accordingly.

He turned away to where the sheriff was leaning against a tree, sick in body as he was de-

spondent at heart. He did not deign to look back as Carl Krishtner, his bald head fairly blushing scarlet, called out some hot retort; but there was one ready to answer for him.

Big Bandy sprung upon the vacated stump, waving his saber, his white locks floating in the breeze as he called out in his deep tones:

"You're axin' which side John Hooper fit onto, Dutch? Yit you know it afore ye axed, by hearin' ef not by seein' with the own eyes o' ye. As Gil Cochrane said, mebbe the bresh an' pawpaws was so pesky thick you couldn't see that fur!"

"I appeal to you, gentlemen," cried the enraged candidate, wildly gesticulating with both arms and head. "What are we here for?"

"To hev a giner'l free discussion, ef your own bills don't lie," bluntly retorted Big Bandy, then suddenly drawing his deformed shape as erect as his infirmities would permit, he added: "You cain't none o' ye say I fit on the wrong side. fer this wrecked body o' mine'd give ye the lie from start to finish. An' as one who wore the gray from eend to eend—as one who went in musket an' come out carver—I ax ye to listen to my testimony. Kin I speak, lads, or must I git down an' bite the tongue o' me in silence, beca'se I don't wear fine clo's an'sling fancy lang-widge?"

"Speech! Give us a talk, brigadier!" came from a dozen different quarters in reply.

"Talk goes, lads," with a genial grin distorting his terribly scarred visage. "Speech is too mighty fine word fer the likes of your Uncle Fuller. But—fair warnin' all! I'm goin' to talk as I fit: right straight ahead, not keerin' a durn how, jest so I git ther!"

"Pears like it's the man, not the office, that's up fer 'scussion here to-day. And I'm mighty glad of it, too! Fer he is a man, from top to toe, from center to circumf'rence! Meanin' John Hooper, gentlemen.

"I do think the grandest, most gloriousest thing that tromps this footstool is a old soldier! I don't keer a durn on which side he fit. All I wants to know is—did he do his duty the best he knewed how?

"Ef he fit on my side, good enough. Ef he fit ag'in' me, still it's good. The way he looked at it, he was on the right side, an' I was on the wrong. But that don't matter at this late day. The war is over. I may be a fool, as some o' ye don't make no bones 'bout callin' of me. But I ain't sech a dug-gun fool as not to know when we was whipped!"

"We wasn't whopped! We were just outnumbered!"

"That's what the hide-in-the-bresh say, but those who did the heft o' the fightin' know better," bluntly retorted Big Bandy. "But that isn't what I started to git at, lads. I say John Hooper fit us like a man, from start to finish. I say that as a old soldier he's good 'nough to git my vote fer office. Right side or wrong side, I'd ruther vote fer a fighter than fer a skulker!"

"A gallant array of advocates—fools and knaves to back him!" sneered Carl Krishtner.

"Ef I be a fool as you hint, Dutchy, 'twas the finger of the Lord as turned my brain after I was a good man grown. But you—pore critter, ye was born a coward an' a idiot!"

Again arose a storm of merriment, under cover of which Big Bandy descended from the stump, turning away to look for the sheriff and Gilbert Cochrane. But they had left the grounds under cover of his "little talk."

Gilbert Cochrane felt that this was the wisest move that could be made under the circumstances, though he naturally hated to leave the field wholly to the enemy.

He saw that Hooper had been utterly worn out by his terrible night ride, and that he would do more harm than good should he try to fill his engagement while in such miserable plight. He needed rest and perfect quiet more than all else.

Satisfied on this point, he led the sheriff to a retired portion of the grounds, and having made sure that the Barnes family had also left the scene, without stopping to share in the barbecue then almost ready for the hungry multitude, he hastily hitched up his team and assisting the sheriff to a seat, drove him away in the direction of home.

The sheriff tried to express his thanks for the bold defense which Cochrane had made for him in his helplessness, but even those few words seemed too much for his shattered strength. And lending him what support was in his power, driving with one hand while his other arm was passed around that weakened figure, Gilbert Cochrane drove as rapidly as possible to his own house.

When those voices were left behind them, and the fresh, balmy, yet bracing odors of the forest surrounded them, John Hooper began to brace up a bit, and at the end of that drive he seemed far stronger than when it began. After all, his trouble was more mental than physical, and Gilbert felt that after a good night's rest, the sheriff would be almost himself again.

A negro servant—no longer slave—met them at the blocks which, Missouri fashion, served instead of a gate to give admission to the spacious yard before the house, and turning the team over to him, Cochrane assisted Hooper out of the

buggy and supported him to the veranda which extended along the front of the house.

"Shaken badly, but not entirely knocked out, Cochrane!" grimly muttered Hooper as he mounted the broad flight of steps and paused at the front door. "I thought I'd caught it worse, or I'd have faced it out back yonder! It cuts—cuts deep, old fellow!" stifling a groan in its birth. "The first time I ever showed the white feather to an enemy since I began to grow a beard!"

"Don't call it that, sheriff, or you'll have to fight me," laughed Cochrane, leading the way into the house and to his special room: an office-like, yet comfortable apartment on the ground floor. "Even Grant knew how to retreat when the right time came, but he struck all the harder when he turned again. So with you; we'll beat the Dutch doughface in the end, never you fear, old fellow!"

If he felt less hearty confidence, nothing in his face or voice betrayed the fact as he hustled about gathering food and drink for his guest, rightly thinking that Hooper would prefer this to having a servant around, at least until he had time to recuperate a little.

Being in touch with a true friend is a marvelous restorative, and dreadfully though he must have suffered, Hooper brightened up for a time, showing much of his old-time fire and strength.

After a thorough bath in cold water, and with a table spread with an abundance of food and drink, he ate and drank in good time with his host, by mutual consent talking about anything else than his recent sufferings or darkened prospects.

"And now, Hooper, you want to roll into bed and never open those eyes of yours before another sun shines through your window," briskly said Cochrane, pushing his chair back when he saw his guest beginning to trifle with the food before him. "I'll show you to your nest."

"Presently—not just yet, Cochrane," muttered Hooper, his face darkening and his bloodshot eyes growing troubled once more. "I've got something to say and to show you, first."

"Twill keep until another day, sheriff. You need sleep and rest. You must take it, or we'll have you breaking down right at the opening of the campaign."

"That's over, before it's begun!"

"Not a bit of it, old fellow!" briskly cried Cochrane. "Why, man, I'm open to lay long odds that this night ride of yours will prove to be the very best thing that could have happened to you—politically speaking, of course," with a slightly embarrassed laugh.

"You don't know the worst, friend," with a gloomy shake of his head, at the same time feeling in his pockets as though in quest of something by which he might more easily explain his meaning. "They've caught me between two fires, and when they're through pegging away, I'll be—Ha! those hellhounds!"

"What have you lost?" asked Cochrane, as his guest sprung to his feet the more thoroughly to explore his pockets. "Did those scoundrels rob you as well?"

The sheriff made no reply until, having fully assured himself that he had thoroughly examined every pocket, he resumed his seat, very pale but more composed than he had been at any moment since his rescue from torture. And his voice was even and clear as he asked:

"What do you think about it, Cochrane? I mean their sending me off on that devilish ride, of course."

Cochrane hesitated a little before answering, but when he did speak, it was in a tone of conviction:

"I believe it was simply a dastardly trick to turn the laugh against you at the very start, Hooper. I can't think they really meant your death, though it might easily have proved that, only for your nag's straying into the crowd."

"I don't. I know it was enough sight blacker than that."

"What do you mean?"

"That I firmly believe I've been sold out!" with a sudden fierceness, striking the table until the dishes danced and rattled. "I know that warning was sent ahead of me. I know that those devils were put on the right track by—Cochrane!"

"You can count on me to the last gasp, sheriff."

"I know, or I wouldn't have said even this much. But I'll name no names until I've got hold of positive proof. Then—Cochrane, you asked me a bit ago if I'd been robbed, or had lost anything?"

Gilbert nodded, too much puzzled to speak, just then.

"When those rascals caught me, I had in my pocket two letters. One was from the State's attorney to the district attorney, and the other was one written by the latter and addressed to me. Each one contained a sharp blowing up, and accusation of neglected duty. In mine were stern orders to hunt down and run in the gang of moonshiners known to be violating the law in this very township, under penalty of being removed from office if I delayed even a single hour!"

"You can't do it, man!" frowned Gilbert,

darkly. "To make an open stir about that just now, would surely cost you an utter defeat!"

"I know it," with a short, grim laugh. "And that's why I said I was caught between two fires. I firmly believe that word was sent in advance, and that I was captured in hopes of some such proof being found on my person."

"Why did you save them, then?" irritably.

"Because my warrant was embodied in that very letter, and I couldn't destroy one without destroying the other. Now do you begin to see the point?"

"You think that—"

"Thinking isn't proof, and we'll wait a bit before mentioning names. But even without that, since the paper is gone, you can see what show I stand of being elected!"

"It may have been lost while your horse run loose."

"Even so, moving against the moonshiners would do the work just as surely, with the odds so heavily against me anyway."

"That would ruin your chances, surely! But of course you'll not make any actual stir in the case until after election?"

"I'll do my duty," was the hard, grim response. "I've never shirked that yet, and I'll not begin at this late day. Ruin or no ruin, I'll enforce the laws to the best of my ability."

"I tell you no! Twill surely defeat you, man alive!"

"Just what that order meant," with a repetition of his metallic laugh. "You and I know there's no moonshining going on here, now, but the stir would be just as fatal. All right! I'll go out white, anyway!"

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEASY LOVER.

FOR the second time that day, Green Gentry urged Jasper Naughton away from danger which that hot-headed young fellow was too greatly blinded by passion to fully realize.

"You heard him say it. I want him to take me! I want him to jest try it on—jest one time! The weight o' his finger—"

"Twould be whole hand or nothing, lad," half-laughed the older, cooler man, his muscular arm stiffening to resist that impulse to break away and turn back.

"I'd lay him out too cold for skinnin'!"

"Once trying ought to be enough in a day."

Naughton abruptly ceased his struggles, turning as pale as his bruises would permit, looking Gentry squarely in the eyes as he spoke in slow, almost painful tones:

"Is it a slur you mean, throwin' that up to me, Green Gentry?"

"It's anything, just so I can get you far enough away from Gil, Naughton, to let your brain cool off. I say—come with me!"

"Better so, Jasper," hurriedly spoke Luke Barnes, never over free with his words, and who had merely helped urge the half wild man away from the scene of danger. "You ain't reely fit to jedge, your own self. Go with Green, an' let it lay over ontel to-morrow."

"But—everybody'll be sayin' I let him drive me off the ground like a sheep!"

"None o' my folks'll say it, anyway. I'll see that they git the rights of it."

"And you don't care a hooter for what any one else may think," laughed Gentry, locking arms and moving off more briskly, at the same time giving Luke Barnes a glance that caused him to turn aside. "Don't play the wild bull any longer, Jasper. We're out of sight and hearing, and it really isn't worth the trouble, between old pardners."

"Ef you think—"

"Bite it off, man!" with a sudden sharpness coming into his voice as he turned until they stood face to face. "You've played the fool this day, and ought to be thanking your lucky stars you've got an eye left to bless yourself with!"

For one so fiery-tempered, Naughton stood meekly enough, though he visibly chafed under those harsh words.

"What's it to you, anyway?" he growled, sulkily.

"If your head's too thick to see that, we'll wait until the fog has time to lift, Jasper," lightly said Gentry, changing back to his former manner, once more leading the way through the scattered trees by which the barbecue grounds were surrounded.

Naughton bore him company, though with an occasional glance over his shoulder that plainly showed his inclinations. His face showed his surprise when, a few minutes later, they came to where a couple of saddle-horses were hitched to saplings not far from the road.

"You're not—I'm not goin' to run away like this!" he growled as he recognized in one of these, his own mount. "The fun hasn't even begun, as yet, and—"

"You've had your share of the fun, as you call it, Jasper, and it hasn't left you any the handsomer," chuckled Gentry, dropping in an easy posture on the sward—for Missouri can boast of her native blue-grass, to the full and truthfully as can Kentucky—and signing his fiery friend to do the same. "A sweet looking

mug to go courting with, that one of yours, my boy!"

"If you haven't got nothin' more'n that to say—"

"Sit down, I tell you, man!" with that old authoritative ring. "So! you're not altogether a fool, Jasper, though you've done your level best this day to prove yourself an ass!"

"What could I do, when I see that devil snuglin' up to—when I knowed he was tryin' his level best to get the bulge onto me?" sulkily growled the younger man, digging his fingers into the soft earth as he lay with face almost hidden in the grass.

"Anything but what you did do, the way matters turned out," was the lazy response. "If you had come out on top 'twouldn't have been so bad. Girls may not actually hanker after being openly fought over, but if it must come, they're mighty apt to think oftenest about the one who whips."

"He didn't whip me! He couldn't begin—"

"Say it was the root that did your business, then, Jasper," with a lazy yawn. "I think it was, myself. But—fact is you came out at the bottom, and Gil Cochrane punished you heap sight worse than if he had both pounded and gouged you."

"I told him to do his wu'st, didn't I?"

"And he did it, though hardly as you meant he should. You can't get over it, Naughton. He bested you at your own hold. But—if you will be guided by my advice, you'll wipe all that out, and leave a long score to your own credit before another moon comes."

"How? Jest tell me how?" eagerly muttered Naughton, lifting his head, his eyes glowing redly through their livid circles.

"To start off with, by holding that ugly temper of yours in check. You know that the old folks are playing your hand for you: then why risk a loss of everything by kicking up a row in public?"

"You don't know—"

"I know that they like you, and that they hate Gil Cochrane worse than poison. I know they're more than ready to see their girl your wife, if only to shut out the other lover."

"They'd flop over to him quicker'n scat! ef he was jest to give up the papers Barnes lost. An' here you've drug me off, leavin' him to hang 'round Myr' Ellen ontel—"

"Will you simmer?" frowned Gentry, as Naughton sprung to his feet with the evident intention of rushing back to the grounds. "Open your ears, man! You hear those wheels?"

The rattle of a farm wagon was just growing perceptible.

"There's your huckleberry, Jasper," with a laugh, as he arose and moved toward his horse. "Luke is making for home. But don't push yourself too forward. Right or wrong, the women will give you credit for spoiling their day off."

Gentry was right, so far as the ownership of the wagon was concerned, and as he saw this, Jasper Naughton fumbled about his horse until the wagon had passed the spot, then mounted and fell in at the rear.

Mrs. Barnes gave him a curt recognition, but Myra kept her face hidden in her sun-bonnet. Jasper was painfully conscious of his battered, discolored features, and shaded them as much as possible by slouching his hat. But he doggedly followed, those very injuries but making him the more resolved not to let the sun set without coming to a final understanding with this girl for whom his love burned so fiercely.

Gentry adroitly sprung from his saddle into the front of the wagon, leaving his horse to follow while he took a seat beside Luke, and through all that drive, he kept up a spirited, pleasant gossip, doing his level best to banish the clouds that obscured each face near him.

Before the house was reached, Naughton plucked up courage enough to draw up beside the wagon and speak to Myra, but she gave him little encouragement to persist. She answered when obliged to do so, but nothing more. And by her unusually cold, reserved manner, she made him feel most distinctly how seriously he had offended her by his actions at the barbecue grounds.

"You kinder desarve it all, sonny," whispered Mrs. Barnes, as Jasper assisted her to alight from the wagon. "But don't give over. I'm on your side, ef nobody else ain't."

"Then—I must hev a word with her, mother," as guardedly muttered the uneasy lover.

He turned to assist Myra, but she was too quick for him, as for Green Gentry. She sprung lightly to the ground, then ran to the house, vanishing from sight of those glowing eyes.

"You see—she runs away from my very touch!" he half-groaned, to the one whom he felt he could best trust with his woes. "It's no use! I might as well give up an' go hang—Durned ef I don't send one dirty whelp out o' the world ahead o' me, though!"

"She's young an' flighty, buddy, but she's a woman, all over. An' a woman ain't to be won over by moanin' an' groanin' that sort o' way," reproved Mrs. Barnes, with a frown. "You wait an' watch. I'll give ye a chance to speak out. The rest lays 'twixt you'n her, Jasper."

Naughton was forced to rest content with that, and he hung around while Luke Barnes was putting up his team, then followed the two men from the stable to the house, though neither of them entered the log-cabin. The October sun was just warm enough to make out-of-doors agreeable, and the elder pair sat down on a bench which stood under the ample boughs of an elm tree near one end of the cabin home.

Both looked grave, and seemed deeply interested in the subject under discussion. One who saw the trio from a distance would have thought Jasper Naughton fully as absorbed in listening to their talk, but if a dozen words entered his ears, he could not have repeated one of them, though his life depended on so doing.

He was watching and waiting for the chance which Mrs. Barnes had promised him, though he contrived to keep his glances veiled. He had thoughts only for Myra and his mad love just then.

His face burned like fire when, at last, he caught sight of her crossing the threshold, wooden bucket in hand, plainly bound for the spring which supplied the household with water for domestic use.

He swiftly turned his back toward the door, lest Myra even then beat a retreat, but he knew each step she took, and the instant he felt she was too far away to return without purposely flouting him, he walked rapidly around the house, from under cover of which he knew he could easily intercept the girl before she could fill her pail and return.

The spring gushed out from beneath a mossy rock, nearly a hundred yards from the house. A clump of trees shaded it, and likewise cut off all view of any one standing at or near the rude stone curbing. Nothing could have been better for the purpose he had in view, and with a dogged resolution, Naughton hurried to that spot.

"It's only me, Myr' Ellen," he said, as the girl gave a start at his footsteps. "Hope I didn't skeer ye too mighty bad?"

"No, but—I must hurry. Mother's waiting for the water to—Let me pass, please!"

For Jasper Naughton stood directly in her path, and she could not avoid him without stepping into the mud caused by the overflow from the rude trough, hollowed out of a split log, on wooden legs.

"Your mother'll be willin' to wait a bit, Myr' Ellen," he coolly said, taking the heavy pail from her hand and resting it on the ground, but without leaving the path open for a retreat on her part. "She won't holler ontel you come, I don't reckon."

Myra glanced up into his face—hardly to be called handsome now, thanks to the hard knuckles of Gilbert Cochrane—and read at least part of the truth therein. Her own face flushed hotly, then grew very pale, as she instinctively drew back until one hand touched the cool stone curbing about the spring.

"You mean—mother sent me here to—you knew I was coming?" she faltered, uneasily trying to meet that ardent gaze.

"She said she'd give me the chaintce I begged her fer, Myr' Ellen. I thank her fer it, double over. An' I—Myra," for once without the usual clipping short of her first name. "I want to beg your pardon like a dog on my knees fer bein' so—fer kickin' up a muss whar you was lookin' on. I didn't mean—but when I see you with that—"

"Don't—I can't bear it!" almost sharply cried the poor girl, covering her hot face with her trembling hands.

Naughton caught her hands and held them almost fiercely in his hot grasp, gazing keenly into that face, trying at once to read the whole truth. For, let his faults be what they may, he loved Myra as only one of his wild, passionate, untamed nature could love.

"You're crying, Myra," his voice hoarse and unsteady. "I'd give my best arm to know fer sure them tears was fer my sake! But—out with it, girl!" almost savagely. "Which is't to be—me or Gil Cochrane? Which one do you mean to hev? Which one do you really love best?"

CHAPTER XII.

THERE IS EVIL IN THE AIR.

FOR a single breath Myra Barnes tried to free her hands from that fierce grasp, but when she saw that she was powerless to do this, she abruptly ceased her struggles, standing proudly erect and gazing squarely into that passion-marked face.

If she had been crying, as Naughton said, there were no signs of it now. Anger, injured pride, womanly resentment must have dried the moisture as by magic.

"Neither one nor the other, Jasper Naughton!" she said, her voice hardly raised above the ordinary, but full of the resentment she felt. "Neither you nor him, unless you can show more respect for the girl than by putting her name to shame in the eyes of the whole county, by fighting over her like mad wolves!"

Jasper Naughton shrunk back as though her

clenched hand had been dashed full in his face. He dropped her hands, putting his own behind his back, but he went no further. His athletic figure still barred the way which she must take in order to escape.

"I didn't ought, Myra," his voice husky and unsteady. "I knowed it a minit afore—I knowed it well. But—when I see him thar, an' you 'pearin' so willin' fer to be made love to—"

"Stop!" with an angry stamp of her little foot, her eyes ablaze, her face flushing vividly. "How dare you say such words, Jasper Naughton?"

"Beca'se I'm a plum' fool I reckon, Myr' Ellen," with a sickly laugh that, more than all else, told how completely he was thrown off his usual balance by insane jealousy. "Beca'se I'm al'ays doin' the wu'st any man kin do fer his own good. But—it's my love for you that makes me sech a idiot, Myra!"

"Then—the less I see and hear of such love, the better! Let me pass, Mr. Naughton."

"Not this way, Myr' Ellen," with a desperate effort regaining something of his wonted coolness. "Thar's jest so much to be said, an' the sooner it's got over with, the better fer us both, I'm thinkin'."

"Will you force me to listen, whether or no, sir?"

That angry sparkle in her eyes should have warned the man, but he would not heed, even if he read it aright. His stubborn nature would not permit him to retreat, even to better himself.

"Not to say *force*, Myr' Ellen, but I've got to hev my say out. An' thar never'll be a better time then right now, to my reckonin'."

"Very well, sir," leaning back against the curbing, her blue eyes unflinchingly meeting his gaze. "All I ask is—be as brief as you possibly can, for mother is waiting for the water."

"She kin wait, heap sight better'n I kin, Myr' Ellen. She knows what I want to say, an' she's more'n ready to hev it said."

"Why not say it to her, then?" with a short, nervous laugh.

After all, even the roughest, rudest, most unpolished man holds a vast advantage over a woman when she knows that he is madly in love with her. Myra knew that Jasper loved her with every fiber of his powerful nature. And all her life had been spent among just such rough, untamed characters, and this rude wooing was not to her what it would have seemed to a girl differently nurtured.

"I'll say it fu'st of all to you, Myr' Ellen, but it gives me more backbone, so to speak, to know that both your pap an' your mother'll be glad to hev it come about the way I want it."

He paused, but Myra said nothing. She was looking down at a little stone as she rolled it back and forth under the toe of her shoe.

"You know all how I'm fixed, Myra," his voice low and far from steady. "You know I've rigged up a snug little home, an' you know all I was thinkin' of an' countin' on while doin' of it, too!"

"How should I know all that?"

"Beca'se you're a woman, with a woman's heart an' a woman's way o' readin' what cain't help showin' in the face an' eyes of a man that loves even the dirt she tromps under her two feet!" was the swift response. "Cain't you come out honest with me, fer once, Myr' Ellen?"

"If I do, you may not thank me in the end, Jasper!"

He flushed, then turned pale. But with true doggedness, he refused to be frightened out of saying what he had marked out in advance. He cleared his throat, then spoke rapidly:

"I built that house *fer* you, Myra. Thar ain't a squar' inch of it all but could talk an hour o' the love I putt out onto it—all *fer* you! Yit—it's big a-plenty fer two more, ef your folks cain't git tha'r rights, an' hev to leave the place they've done paid honest fer, little woman. They're heap welcome to a home 'long 'ith you 'nd me, ef that cussed thief, Gil Cochrane, drives them out o' tha'r own!"

"How do you know it *is* their own?" asked Myra, with a curious glow leaping into her eyes. "There is no proof that the money was paid."

"Do you say it *wasn't* paid?" ejaculated Naughton, in amazement.

"No, for I believe it was paid, for both father and mother say so," was the slow response, her eyes drooping for the moment. "But—there is no proof to be found. And—after all, he isn't so much to blame."

"Not—Myra Ellen Barnes!" almost fiercely catching the brim of her bonnet and exposing her downcast face. "Kin you find a excuse fer the likes o' Gil Cochrane?"

"Why not, if one exists?" boldly meeting his fiery gaze.

"Do you—do you like Gil Cochrane?"

"Yes," was the instant response, smiling faintly as he scowled blackly upon her. "I do like him. But I don't love him, as you seem to think, Jasper," her voice growing a little softer, though her eyes still sparkled ominously under his rage. "I like you both, but instead of that liking ever growing into love, I fear 'twill turn to actual hatred if you continue to persecute me so bitterly—so there!"

"You like Gil Cochrane? Wait, girl!" his

words hardly articulate with his rage at the bare suspicion. "You know me. You know I'm a man o' my word, be it given to fri'nd or inemy. An' so I tell you this, flat an' plenty plain even fer a woman: Ruther then hev Gil Cochrane win an' wear you, the only woman I kin ever love, I'd kill all two both o' ye—so thar!"

Vicious as was his rage, Myra met it without flinching, and now there was genuine anger flaming in her big blue eyes. Her red lips were parted to speak, bat at that moment the sharp, clear voice of Green Gentry came to their ears:

"Jap Naughton! come over here! You're wanted!"

So distinct was the voice that Naughton instinctively turned in that direction, and catching up the bucket of water, Myra slipped past him, and was in open view of those near the house before he could put out a hand to stay her flight.

He saw this, and sulkily accepted the situation, slouching from under cover, and slowly walking back to where the two men were still sitting under the elm tree.

"Take your time, old fellow," laughed Gentry, jocosely. "We've both been there, more or less, and you're not to be blamed so mighty much. I only wish I was free to enter the lists against you—well, I do!"

He cast an admiring glance after the swiftly moving figure of the girl, but Luke Barnes, doubled over, with elbows supported by his knees, smoked rapidly, his face the picture of frowning gloom.

"Jest drap that, Gentry, ef you ain't sp'ilin' fer a fight," sulkily growled Naughton, flashing an ugly glance at the other from under his heavy brows. "You hollered—what ye want o' me?"

"A plain answer to a blunt question; no less. Did you help tie the sheriff up that fashion, Jap?"

Naughton flashed a swift, almost startled glance toward Luke Barnes, but the squatter was still staring moodily at the ground, as though he knew that question could have but one answer, or else that he felt no especial interest in the subject.

"You know mighty well I never didn't," sharply said Naughton, his gaze reverting to that blandly smiling face once more.

"No harm to ask, then, Jasper."

"Fer ef I did, then you was mixed up into it," still more sulkily. "I was with you ever sence daybreak yest'day mornin', wasn't I?"

"And I can prove the clearest of *alibis*," nodded Gentry, laughing.

There was a faint echo in his tone that caused Luke Barnes to suddenly gaze into that smiling countenance, but he saw nothing to confirm that sudden, disagreeable suspicion.

"Whoever done it, it's boun' to make a heap o' trouble," he said, with an uneasy scowl. "It was an ugly job—a fool' trick!"

"That's what Krishtner called it, if you remember," chuckled Green Gentry. "Mighty slick tongue that fellow carries. Pity he hadn't backbone according to his size, fighting times! Make it easier for us to carry the 'lection."

"I'd hate to think any o' our side 'd do sech a foul trick," added Barnes, slowly, flashing a keen glance from face to face, then resuming his former attitude. "Ef he kin prove it ag'in us, it'll make matters all the wuss. An' goodness knows he was bad enough afore!"

"So bad that he couldn't well be worse," coincided Gentry, at the same time slipping one hand into his breast and taking out a flat pocket-book, though making no move toward opening it just then. "And yet I'm not so mighty sure of that either," with a grim nod of his head.

"You've got somethin' to say, Green Gentry: out with it in a lump, cain't ye?" irritably muttered Naughton. "What did ye call me back here fer, anyway?"

"To tell you that there's evil in the air—gobs and heaps of it, no less!" coolly nodded the sporting man.

"What sort? That dead dog a'fa'r?"

"Well, that hasn't improved it much, I reckon, since Hooper will naturally lay it all onto our side, but—"

"I thought you called it a trick o' his own hatchin', neighbor?" dryly observed the squatter his gaunt figure straightening up.

"So I did, but where would the benefit come in, if he didn't work it off onto the shoulders of those politically opposed to him?"

Luke Barnes turned his eyes away, but it was easy to see his brain was working along the same line. Gentry smiled, half-maliciously. He cared but little for unspoken thoughts, and he knew that the squatter would hardly openly accuse him of having a hand in that outrage, when all was revealed to him.

"Do you know what brought Hooper to these parts, this trip?"

"The speakin', of course."

"Not much it didn't!" his voice catching a hard, bitter echo as he opened the pocket-book and extracted therefrom a folded paper. "He came here, loaded for bear! He came here under strict orders to spare neither pains nor money in hunting out and arresting a certain evil gang of lawbreakers, who try to keep the

wolf from the door by working up the grain they can't get to a market in solid shape!"

"You don't mean—"

"I just do!" with a sharp nod in answer to the hurried ejaculation of Barnes. "And right here I hold the proof, in pure black and white!" he added, tapping the now unfolded paper with one forefinger.

"What is it? Whar'd you git it from?" in the same breath asked his companions, breathlessly peering over his shoulder at the papers.

"What is it? Letters, first, a warrant, second," grimly answered Gentry, then settling himself to slowly read the lines therein.

In stern, gloomy silence the two men listened to those low but distinct tones, fearing to lose a word lest they fail to fully comprehend the nature of the danger impending.

For these were the very papers lost by or stolen from Sheriff Hooper, of which he spoke to Gilbert Cochrane.

"Show no mercy!" repeated Gentry, refolding the papers and stowing them away in his pocketbook, which was then buttoned up in his breast. "So it reads. And you can guess what it means when addressed to John Hooper!"

"Whar did you git the papers, Green Gentry?" slowly demanded Luke, gazing intently into that handsome, bearded face.

"Found them where Sheriff Hooper must have lost them while taking his little pleasure jaunt, neighbor," was the cool reply. "Found them in the road as I went to the barbecue, this morning, of course!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BIG BANDY'S NEW FRIEND.

THOUGH it could hardly be called the complete success those instituting it had fondly dreamed would prove to be the case, thanks to unforeseen circumstances, more than one attending the barbecue secretly or openly vowed never to forget day or occasion.

Barney Budge, "from Kentucky, sah!" was one of the latter, and he was more or less eloquently putting that sentiment into words when, the speaking past, the feast disposed of, the jugs run dry, he was shuffling along in the direction of Brimstone Butte, in company with Big Bandy.

"A fatter shoat I never pegged into, comrade!" he declared, hanging unsteadily to an arm of the brigadier with one hand, while using the other to lingeringly wipe his thick lips. "The mutton was jest a wee taste rammy, but the beef was good 'nough fer a hog! But—Mighty powerful queer, ain't it?"

"Which?" drawled the brigadier, in true Missouri fashion.

"They 'most al'ays giner'lly is a b-u-t to things, I've noticed," dolefully sighed Barney Budge before adding: "An' the one hitched up to this yere otherways gelorous 'casion b'longs to the State heap sight mo' then it does to the people, I'm reckonin', Giner'l Bandy."

"How!" drawled the brigadier, using the substitute interrogative.

"Ef a barbecue is give in good old Kentucky—an' right thar the gelorous instertion was fu'st borned, giner'l—they *mought* be sech a thing as hevin' the pork, or the mutton, or the beef, or sech like side-dishes fall short. I say they *mought* be sech a thing come to pass under extr'o'ny suckumstances, mind ye, giner'l!"

"Reckon?" faintly ventured Big Bandy, too thoroughly mixed up to venture on anything more compromising.

"Not that sech a thing ever *hes* come to pass, mind ye, but—as I said afore—ef it *was* to be so, thar's one ingrejience which grand old Kentucky couldn't never fall short on—an' that is whisky!"

"I want to know!"

"An' I'm tellin' ye so you *will* know, Giner'l Bandy," nodded Barney Budge with impressive solemnity. "Tain't jest to find fault. Nur tain't jest to find somethin' to be waggin' the chin o' me over, mind ye, giner'l, nuther. But it's humbly fer to p'int out to ye the great settin' sin o' your otherwise grand an' gelorous State—ef she *did* keep straddle o' the fence so mighty long that she lost the one hon'able chaine for signin' the name of her 'way up onto the roll o' fame which—Durn the dust!" with a husky cough. "You don't got a drap o' wetness in your clo'es, mebbe, giner'l?"

"They's a crick jest ahead a bit, comrade."

Barney gave a mighty sigh and groan combined, but if he heard, Big Bandy let it pass without remark. Possibly he was not quite such a fool as people said he was, after all!

"Never mind—mebbe I kin spit it out-a-talkin'," gloomily said the Kentucky gentleman. "But—more'n ever I'm sot in my fu'st notion that what old Mizzouri wants wuss then all else, is missianaries!"

"Which?"

"Missionaries—knowable men from Kentucky fer to preach the gospel o' free licker an' heaps of it!" enthusiastically cried Barney Budge, waving an arm so wildly that he tangled his feet up and must have fallen in the dirt only for the convenient support lent by the brigadier.

"Stiddy—as you were!"

"Didn't ye see it, giner'l? Bump kicked up an' most throwed me out o' the saddle! Never known sech a thing in good old Kentucky, whar— But as I sot out to say—what was it, Giner'l Bandy?"

"Pears like ye was sorter skirmishin' 'round the edges o' somethin', comrade, but ef I kin tell jest what—shoot me!" reluctantly confessed the brigadier, then brightening up again as he hastily added: "S'pose we let it simmer in the brain o' ye, comrade, ontel we git home? Thar's Brimstone, an' my palace ain't so mighty much furder, now!"

Barney Budge gazed into that scarred face for a brief space, his eyes full of deep, yet humble reproach. Then he choked down a sigh, and dejectedly shuffled off in the direction indicated by the brigadier.

Big Bandy wore a troubled expression, and he stole many a shy glance at the face and figure of his new friend. He could not wholly understand him, as yet, nor the instinct which warned him to get rid of the bummer as truly dangerous company. He seemed innocent enough, and yet—

Ever since having his hopes dashed to the ground by being tossed over the head of the deformed giant, Barney Budge had stuck to the brigadier like a leech. And when Big Bandy left the barbecue grounds, he found, in some inexplicable manner, Barney Budge had won an invitation from his lips to pass the night in his company.

"Ef ye only knowed how that tarm 'palace' hits me in the sore!" the bummer whined, dolefully, after a brief silence, during which they began climbing the steep side of Brimstone Butte. "But how could ye? What is they hangin' 'bout the shape o' me to warn ye that one time I lived into a palace that called me owner an' boss? What? Not a durn thing! Not even the weenty smell o' whisky—wuss luck!"

"I didn't—mebbe they's—ef I didn't lose the cork out last time I tuck a snort!" feebly stammered the brigadier, actually shrinking from that eager, wolfish glare as Budge panted:

"Ye got any—say ye ain't jokin', giner'l! They's 'nough stuff up thar fer to give a pore critter anyway one taste?"

"Ef it hain't got upset, they ought to be a jug o' moonshine—"

"That's it!" excitedly. "Moonshine! what I was comin' to when that pesky bump kicked up an mixed the wits o' me. Keep it in mind, giner'l, an' le's hurry to the palace!"

With that look of trouble deepening on his scarred face, Big Bandy led the way to his humble mountain home: a log and stone cabin that was half-buried in the hillside, yet affording a snug and dry shelter from the storm, of rain, wind or snow.

By this time the sun was sinking low, and the October air was growing chill, there on Brimstone Butte. This was enough to in itself account for the readiness with which Big Bandy produced a stone jug, to the mouth of which Barney Budge eagerly glued his lips, relinquishing it with a long sigh of mingled satisfaction and regret, murmuring:

"Good 'nough, what they is of it, giner'l!"

The brigadier took a swallow, more through courtesy than because he really loved the stuff, then set to work kindling a fire on the capacious stone hearth. A kindly word or two bade his new friend make himself at home, but this was hardly needed. Barney dropped upon the low couch, and set his tongue to running once more.

"It was missionaries an' moonshine I was wantin' to talk 'bout, Giner'l Bandy, when that pesky bump—but that don't count, now. Back in good old Kentucky, when the war was ended an' we quit beca'se we got tired o' lickin' them durned, bull-headed Yanks; back in Kentucky whar I hedn't even the h'arth-stone left o' my grand palace, I'm tellin' ye, giner'l—I kinder tuck to runnin' moonshine fer to keep a rag on the back o' me, an' a mouthful atwixt my two jaws. An' so—waal, mebbe ye know how it comes, your own self. The sheriff lit down onto me, an' thar I was: clean bu'sted up in business!"

"An' come over here to git out o' his reach?"

"Fer one thing, yes. Fer 'nother—I say, giner'l," lowering his voice to a confidential pitch as he cast a weary glance around the room. "What's the show fer settin' up a still in these parts? Or, mebbe, gittin' in with a good party already into the business?"

"I don't know, an' so can't say," curtly said the brigadier. "Ef you 'low to break the law, mebbe you'd better not trust a fool too mighty fur. Empty skull an' loose tongue runs in couples, they say!"

"Bless ye, giner'l, they ain't no law ag'in' talkin' in Mizzouri, is they?" spluttered Barney Budge; then laughingly: "An' I ain't tryin' fer to git into any o' your own secruts, nuther, comrade. All I wanted to say is this: ef I could rake an' scrape together 'nough money fer to git a worm an' other riggin', could I sell the dew 'round hyar?"

"Not knowin', cain't say," muttered Big Bandy, so plainly on his guard that his guest took the

hint thus conveyed and, temporarily at least, let the dangerous subject drop.

Rising from the pallet, he stretched his limbs, yawning widely, then slouched out of doors, where his manner instantly changed. He seemed very much awake as he gazed swiftly around him, and if he had not been such a harmless looking creature, one noting his manner might well have been excused for having strong suspicions awakened by it.

Standing with back toward open door, Barney Budge slipped a well-worn paper from his bosom, taking alternate glances at its face and the lay of the ground around him. But then, as a sound came from the cabin, he as slyly returned the paper to its hiding-place, innocently humming a war song as he faced the door.

"Ain't so nippy, these nights, as a body'd think, so fur up on a hill, giner'l," he drawled, again crossing the threshold. "Lovely night it's gwine to be, jedgin'. Better'n last, fer all-night tramp or ride. An' that makes me think: turrible lonesome that sheriff must a' bin feelin', hitched up so—eh?"

"I don't reckon he'll fergit it over soon," dryly said Bandy, busy with his preparation of supper for himself and guest.

"Wonder ef he didn't come that way prowlin' 'round a'ter moonshiners?" slowly ventured Budge.

"Ef he did, he ketched it in the line o' duty."

"Durn sech a duty! An' double-durn all them as sot sech a duty fer one white man to do ag'in' another!" flashed Budge, dashing one clinched hand into the open palm of its mate.

"Ef 'twas me he was tryin' to run down—ef I hed tuck a finger into that doin', jest bet your sweet life the job wouldn't a' bin jobbed the way they botched that job—no it jest wouldn't now!"

"Which?" slowly drawled Big Bandy, rising up and facing the gentleman from Kentucky.

Possibly a little of the fire-glow lingered in his dark eyes. If not, Barney Budge ought to have taken warning in time. Instead, he spoke even more viciously than before:

"Ef I'd a' bin thar, mixin' into the job, I'd bin in fer tyin' the man to the dog's neck! They killed the best critter of the two!"

"Stiddy, comrade!" rumbled the brigadier's heavy voice, and one hand dropped warningly on a shoulder of his guest. "You're talkin' of a white man. You're talkin' of a old soldier, who give up all he held precious on earth fer what he held to be his bounden duty. He fit us to the bitter eend, an' I honor him fer it, though I'd a' done my level best to a' killed him, then, ef we'd met on the battle ground."

"But—he fit onto the wrong side!" spluttered Budge.

"Wrong in our eyes, mebbe, but right in his'n. An'—it was a dirty trick, that ought to be wiped out in blood! An' so—when I tell ye, flat, that I hold John Hooper as a dear fri'nd, comrade, mebbe you'll low the matter to drap right whar you found it."

"Ef you feel that way, why—"

"I jest do, comrade," with a troubled frown coming into his face. "Pore as I be, I'd do a heap to hev it all blotted out. Fer it's a foul trick that's got to be paid fer—paid fer double over! An' I'm only hopin' they won't none o' the innocent suffer fer what the guilty did!"

Barney Budge looked very humble after this outburst, and hardly opened his lips again until the brigadier announced supper. And even the production of the nearly empty jug only drew a mournful sigh from his lips.

After supper was dispatched and the rude table cleared, Big Bandy picked up a wooden bucket and said he was going to the spring after some water, leaving his new friend alone in the cabin. And the moment his footsteps died out in the distance, Barney Budge crept closer to the bright fire on the hearth, taking out that mysterious paper, opening its folds and eagerly, almost greedily poring over the lines marked thereon. For though there were a few words of writing, hardly decipherable now, through much handling, the majority of lines went to form a rude sort of map.

So deeply absorbed was he, that he seemed lost to all else, and he gave a howl of terror as a heavy hand closed on his shoulder.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STORY OF UNCLE JUPE.

His head swung around as though hung on a swivel, and his startled eyes met the keen, almost savage gaze of the brigadier.

"Good Lawd, giner'l—why don't ye skeer a poor critter plum' to death an' done with it?" he ejaculated, with an air of relief as though glad matters were no worse, even while he tried to slip the paper back into his bosom.

"Ef you ain't guilty, what's thar to git skeered over?"

"Guilty? Me? Waal, ef I ever, no I never!" spluttered Barney Budge, with a feeble show of honest indignation. "When a man talks that way to a gentleman, 'pears to me it's mighty nigh time that gentleman tuck his own self whar he kin be better 'preciated. An' so—"

That fierce grip on his shoulder relaxed, and with those words, Budge rose to his feet as though about to bow himself out of the cabin with all the dignity befitting a gentleman from

Kentucky who feels his honor has been shamefully outraged. But before he could put this into execution, Big Bandy, who had simply made a leap to arm himself, caught him by an arm and savagely twisted him to the floor, at the same time snatching up the tell-tale bit of paper as it fluttered down.

"Stiddy, you cur!" the veteran growled, planting a foot on the chest of the prostrate figure, holding the bared point of his trusty saber to his throat. "Stay putt, dug-gun ye!"

"But I never—quit!" in a muffled howl of mingled terror and impotent rage, as that keen point fairly pricked, through the skin under his stubby chin.

Steady as fate, one hand kept the saber-point hidden in a flabby fold of dirty skin. Heavier pressed that foot on his chest. And holding the paper so that the red light of the fire fell across its face, the brigadier studied the marks thereon.

Among other words, most of which seemed disjointed, as though only the main points had been noted down for reference, he recognized the names of "Brimstone Butte," and "Hollow Hill."

With these as a clew to guide his wits, he had little difficulty in deciding that the map really represented a portion of the mount known equally well by either name. And as he studied the lines still more closely, he fancied that the drawing had something to do with the side of the hill on which his own cabin was located.

"Mercy—don't—take it 'way!" whined Barney Budge, in muffled tones, lying very still, and hardly daring to use his vocal organs lest that deadly point sink deeper into the flesh.

"It's fitten ye should beg, critter," sternly muttered Big Bandy, lowering the paper until he could gaze into that flushed face below. "But is it fitten I should spar?"

"Quarter—old soldier—fit on same side!"

"Then I cain't wonder no longer why the Feds licked us clean out o' our boots an' britches!" said Big Bandy, with a short laugh that was hardly less frightful than his frown. "But ef you'd lie one way, you'd lie 'nother. An' of all mis'able critters I do 'spise a liar!"

"What bev I done to—"

"What beven't ye done, ruther?" indignantly flashed the brigadier, holding up the paper, and shaking it so viciously that one worn fold parted company with the rest.

"Don't—save it!" gasped Budge, in seeming agony of mind as his eyes tried to follow the fragment as it floated toward the fire. "It's a holy heap o' money, an'—"

"Blood-money, you cursed spy!" grated the brigadier, his eyes glowing redly, his scarred face filled with hot indignation and honest scorn.

"Ef I could save—"

"Blood-money?" echoed Budge, with real or well feigned wonder in his eyes and tones. "I don't understand what you mean!"

"Shell I tell ye what I mean? Shell I tell ye how I'm gwine to pay you off fer doin'— Wait a bit," his tones suddenly growing more natural, though his foot-pressure never slackened, and his saber still maintained that chilling touch.

"You come to me as one honest man to another. You 'peared like you wanted help an' vittles, an' I offered ye all both. An' fur as I knowed how, bein' only a pore, mis'able wreck o' what I used to was, how did ye pay me back?

"By cussin' the man I'm proud to call a fri'nd. By tryin' to git me to sell ye the secrets o' this—of the neighbors who've put tha'r clean trust into me. By takin' my ruff-tree as a kiver to your dirty schemes ag'inst men whose only crime is that of tryin' to make a livin' fer tha'r starvin' famblys out o' the grain they spend tha'r weary days plantin' an' growin' and reapin'."

"All this, mind ye, critter, you're guilty of, under my own ruff. An' when I ketch ye makin' out the very plan an' map which ye think I'll fetch ye to whar they'm at work, moonshinin', you whine fer mercy!"

"I'll give ye half—"

"I'd starve a thousan' times over afore I'd eat or drink a bite or sup bought with the price of my feller-men's liberty!" sternly said Big Bandy, more angry than ever at this attempt to bribe him.

"But—tain't that—treasure hid by nigger!" gasped Budge.

Big Bandy gave a sharp ejaculation, and in his surprise he removed both foot and weapon, but instead of trying to arise, Budge hastily sputtered:

"I'm huntin' fer a lot o' money an' sech, hid by a nigger called Uncle Jupe, fu'st part o' the war, an' never found till yit! I ain't no spy lookin' fer secret stills—no I ain't!"

"But—ef I mought only b'lieve ye, critter!"

"Why not?" with increasing boldness, now that the worst of his peril had passed over his head. "Durn the whisky—cept fer my own drinkin'! It's gold I'm after, an' they's a mighty heap of it stowed away not a thousan' miles right from this identickle spot!"

"Then this—cross the heart o' ye you ain't huntin' out no moonshiners?"

"Cross my heart double times over—no, I ain't, now!" with an emphatic nod as he rose to

his feet and gave his frame a gingerly shake to assure himself that no bones had been broken by his fall. "Cross my heart that I'm only come all the way from Kentucky jest fer to onearth that store o' gold an' silver an' sich, hid fu'st part o' the war by a nigger o' these parts called Uncle Jupe!"

"I've hearn tell o' Uncle Jupe," slowly muttered Big Bandy, passing a hand across his wrinkled brow as he stared fixedly at the paper.

"Then mebbe you kin— Thar she am, thank Moses!" and Barney Budge eagerly jumped for the bit of paper lying dangerously nigh the glowing coals on the stone hearth. "I know the hull thing by heart, but ef you'll—"

He cut himself short, a look of greedy doubt coming into his face as he watched his host. Would there be any advantage in binding himself to a division with this man? Could his possible services be worth so great a sacrifice?

"You lived in these parts, Giner'l Bandy," he ventured, feeling his way. "Mebbe you used to know the nigger?"

"Only sence the war, comrade," gravely answered the brigadier, putting away his saber, once more his usual self. "But I've hearn the neighbors talk of Uncle Jupe, an' 'bout how he was s'posed to hev hid a lot o' truck b'longin' to his old marse, to keep the Feds from totin' it off, when the tide begun to change down this way."

"Then you don't know nothin' fer dead sure, your own self?"

Big Bandy shook his head in grave silence. Barney Budge hung his head for a little space, evidently hurriedly studying his wisest course. Avarice may have urged him to say no more, lest this heavy-handed man who was so terribly free with his sword, should lay claim to the lion's share of the coveted treasure-trove, but his physical fears warned him not to risk losing both treasure and life by trying to secure too much.

Evidently this last argument prevailed, for he lifted his head and frankly encountering that gaze, spoke out with more plainness:

"I ain't holdin' no grudge, Giner'l Bandy, an' to prove it, I'll tell ye jest what I know my own self, ef you'll agree fer to do your sheer o' bringin' the treasure to light ag'in."

"I don't ax, no sheer, comrade. I kin live without it, an' a man who'd ax more'n that is a hog."

"All right, ef you'd ruther hev it so," chuckled Budge, rubbing his dirty hands in undisguised delight. "All the more for me, an' when I git these ten fingers onto it, I'll set up a still that'll jest make this hull county smell o' mountain dew—so I will, now!"

"An' I tuck you fer a cussed revenue spy!"

Barney Budge made a wry face. Even he seemed disgusted at being mistaken for such a vile creature.

"Waal, the best of us will git off, sometimes, an' ef we both live long 'nough, you'll know me better'n to reckon me so mighty low down. But as I sot out to say: thar was, fu'st part o' the war, a mighty rich chap livin' nigh to this hill, named Barbour—Kenneth Barbour, ef I hain't twisted the name wrong ways fo'most?"

"I don't reckon. I never met up with him, but they say he was a uncle, or some sech kin, to young Gilbert Cochrane."

"Jest so," nodded Barney Budge, with a hungry glance toward the paper which the brigadier still held in his grasp, but seemingly not daring to ask for its return, as yet. "An' he hed a body-servant called Uncle Jupe. An' lackin' a better, he left his hull propety in charge o' the nigger when he jumped off to the wars."

"I've hearn all that. Come down to later facks."

"Waal, the tide turned, as I said afo', an' Uncle Jupe he picked up all the money an' papers an' sich-like, an' hid 'em som'ers; in this dentickle hill, ef the story hes come down right. An'—would you b'lieve it? That nigger knowed enough fer to draw up that paper you've got into the grip o' ye! So he wouldn't lose track o' what he hid I reckon, mebbe."

"How did it come down to you, comrade?" slowly asked the brigadier, as his gaze turned from the mutilated map to that covetous face.

"Jest the pi'nt I was comin' to, giner'l," with a faint sigh of uneasiness as he watched that paper. "You know—or ef you don't jest know, you kin sorter give a guess—how oneasy things was gittin' down in these parts, fer the biggest part o' the war. Fu'st one side an' then t'other tuck the range. An' twixt them come gangs o' bushwhackers an' g'rillers which wasn't keerin' any too much what flag they fit under, or which color kivered tha'r nakedness. See?"

"I know; the folks hev a heap sight to say of it, even yit," nodded the brigadier, his gaze steadily noting each alteration in that face.

"Waal, one o' these gangs—they wasn't all so terrible bad, ye know, giner'l, an' war makes mighty quar bedfellers, too! Waal, I met up 'long i'ith one o' that gang, an' we parded together for quite a little. An' he told me all 'bout Uncle Jupe an' his hidin' of them things, ye know. An'—waal, he done give me that map, sayin' that to them who dast make the s'arch, they was a monster heap o' pay into it!"

"If wu't so mighty much, what made him

give it to you?" steadily asked the brigadier. "Why'nt he come fer the money him own self?"

"Waal, mebbe he did 'low to, but he met up i'ith a accident. Run ag'inst a knife one night when he was drunk. An'—"

"Wasn't in your hand, that knife, Barney?"

"Good Lawd! would I be tellin' of it, ef 'twas that way?" spluttered Budge, with wide eyes and seemingly honest indignation at the expressed suspicion.

"I didn't know but that was how it come in your han's, but ef I wronged ye, I ax your pardon, Barney. You was sayin'—?"

"Waal, I was 'bout through. My mate told me the map hed to do with Brimstone Butte, or Holler Hill, an' so—I come this way to hunt."

"An' what was done to Uncle Jupe?"

"He—he must 'a' died. I couldn't never git my mate to say."

Big Bandy stood in silence for a few moments, his head bent over the paper as though studying out its details, but if such was his object, his grave, set features told no tales to the eager eyes that watched him. Until—with a swift forward stride, Big Bandy dropped the map directly into the center of the blazing fireplace!

CHAPTER XV.

THE BRIGADIER WARNS BARNEY BUDGE.

FOR A single instant Barney Budge stood like one petrified, literally unable to believe the evidence of his own senses; but then, as he saw the precious paper drop down to fall among the blazing brands, he gave a choking yell of horror and made a desperate plunge to save it from total destruction.

"Git it—don't let it burn to—"

"Stiddy, critter!" rumbled that deep voice, and a strong arm not only pushed him back, but that deformed figure barred the way until the map was entirely destroyed.

"Mad—plum' crazy-mad!" groaned the bummer, ceasing his vain efforts as he saw the paper turn to ashes, then whirl up the wide-mouthed chimney on the draught.

Big Bandy lowered his arm and stepped quietly aside, his voice betraying no excitement, though full of deep meaning.

"Ef I be crazy, Barney, I ain't so bad off as them that don't know any better then to tote sech a thing round with 'em every day. I ain't nigh crazy 'nough to kerry a rope fer my own hangin'."

"I never done it," moaned Budge, seemingly too completely broken down by misfortune to maintain any thought of revenge on the one who had so unexpectedly destroyed his property, and with it his long-cherished hopes of winning a fortune at a single stroke. "Ef they was blood onto it, my han' never let it run out. All I knowed was—an' now it's gone! Up chimby! Smoke an' ashes—durn my ornery skin!"

He dropped to the floor in a miserably-dejected heap, burying his face in his hands, a wreck of ruined hopes.

Big Bandy made no move toward him, standing like a deformed statue in the full glow of the fire, only the fingers of one hand stirring as they mechanically twisted a portion of his patriarchal beard. But in his dark eyes there glittered a curious mixture of doubt and suspicion as he watched and listened.

"Gone up!" moaned Barney Budge, his frame shivering perceptibly as he groveled on the floor of beaten earth. "Bu'sted! All in the time a cat could bat her eye! An' it wu'th a fortin!"

"An' it wu'th the sudden death o' the critter as was fool enough to tote it round with him!"

Barney Budge gave a sudden start as that deep, earnest tone broke through his husky lamentations. He lifted his head and stared up into that grave face, half in anger, half in helpless sorrow.

"How could ye, giner'l? How could ye wipe out the life-long hopes of a pore critter who—an' my own two lookin' eyes see it go up in smoke an' ashes! Go up chimby!"

"Ef it tuck with it all mem'ry o' them lines, so much the better fer you, Barney Budge."

"So you kin git the hull pile to your lone-some self?" cried the treasure-seeker, rising to his feet and staring at the brigadier with dawning suspicion coming into his own features. "Was that why you rob a feller critter who put his trust into your honor? Was that why you turned all his hopes to smoke an' ashes?"

"Stiddy, Barney Budge," gravely uttered the brigadier, lifting one hand in warning as the other clinched his fists and seemed on the point of seeking physical revenge for his loss. "You ain't nigh the fool you try to make out. You don't b'lieve what's crossin' the lips o' ye this minnit."

"A hull e-tarnal fortin'—gone up in smoke an' ashes!"

"I've hearn some talk 'bout sech a treasure hevin' bin bid out by a nigger called Uncle Jupe," slowly said the brigadier, still with that curious indecision in his dark eyes. "But the woods is more'n full o' jest sech fool' stories."

"But this'ne come too straight fer to be crooked," moaned Budge.

"But even 'lowin' the story was clean truth, an' doublin' up the 'mount o' money folks talk o' the nigger's hidin' out, even then a man is

wuss then a fool who thinks—even thinks, mind ye, Barney Budge! A man is heap sight wuss then a crazy fool who tries to read the secrets of Hollow Hill!"

There was something so deeply impressive in the manner of the brigadier as he pronounced these words, that even his grief for the down-falling of his airy castles could not blind Barney Budge to their importance.

"But—ef nobody else couldn't find it? Ef they'd all give it over as a bad job? An' ef I hed a sart'in clew to— Ashes an' smoke! Jest ashes an' smoke—wuss luck!"

Barney stared into the fire with helpless misery, seemingly unconscious of those dark orbs, still trying to read the truth in his miserably dejected countenance.

"Ashes nur yit smoke cain't never rise up in evidence strong 'nough to fit a rope 'round the thrapple of a man, Barney Budge."

"I don't—you mean somethin', but blamed ef I kin tell jest what!" blurted Budge, after a quick gaze into that face.

Brigadier Bandy turned away long enough to push a rude, self-made stool toward his guest, taking a seat on its mate, then speaking with greater directness than he had used heretofore.

"Ef I've done you a wrong, Barney Budge, I'm powerful sorry fer it. But when I putt that paper into the fire, I done it in hopes o' savin' what orter be wu'th heap sight more to you then a fancy fortin' like that folks hitch onto Uncle Jupe. Yes I did, Barney Budge."

"Fer longer'n two year I've bin dreamin' over that pile o' gold an' sich-like. An' when I gits e'ena'most whar I could putt my hand onto it, thar she flies away—up chimby!" dejectedly muttered the bummer, staring gloomily into the heart of the fire.

"Mebbe 'twas only a map in your eyes, Barney Budge, but 'twould 'a' bin a death-warant in others!"

Again the bummer started, with a show of fright in his face and manner. But swiftly following this came the ugly suspicion again.

"You know the spot them lines marked out, Giner'l Bandy. You kin walk over each foot o' the ground they 'luded to. An' so—did you burn that map—my prope'ty, mind ye!—so ye could dig up the treasure your own self? Did ye count on keepin' the hull pile?"

Big Bandy flung out one bony hand with a gesture of proud contempt, though on his scarred face there came a look of humility.

"What is gold an' silver, and the likes o' all that, to one in my fix, critter? Ef I found 'nough to waller into like a hog in a spring-hole, could it fetch back the wits I lost in the war? Would it make my face clean an' smooth as it use to was? Could it straighten the ugly crook in the back o' me?"

"Then what made ye shet out my chainte o' findin' the gold?" demanded Barney Budge, in subdued tones, his eyes drooping once more. "Ef I could only— Cuss the whirligig brain o' me!" with a muffled howl as he buried his fingers in his hair. "Ef I could only 'member jest how them lines runs, long 'nough fer to mark 'em down ag'in!"

"Heap sight better not, Barney Budge," swiftly interposed the brigadier, once more fully on the alert. "You're in plenty danger as it stan's, 'thout doin' any more to make it surer."

"What hey I done? What sort o' danger be ye hintin' at?" spluttered the startled man.

"Danger o' bein' tuck fer somethin' mighty sight dif'rent from the critter ye said ye was down at the barbecue, fer one thing," was the slow response.

"What was it I said? That I fit in the war? So I did. That I was one o' Giner'l Jo Shelby's men? Who dast to hint I wasn't?"

"Ye might 'a' done heap wuss, Barney Budge," with a nod of grim approval, his somber features lighting up a trifle at that. "Jo Shelby was a man, an' I wouldn't ax no better title then to call myself one o' Shelby's brigade. But, that ain't what I wanted to git at," as he passed a hand slowly across his brows, like one trying to clear away a foggy vail.

"Then I don't see what sort o' danger I could be gittin' into," muttered Budge, with a frown of perplexity. "I hain't killed, nur robbed, nur done wuss then to tramp the kentry, fer lack of a hoss to ride. Is a body to hang fer the like o' that, giner'l?"

"That's it!" nodded the brigadier, nodding sharply as his hand came down with a slap on one thigh. "I knew I'd ketch the idee when it come floatin' back ag'in! An'—ef you really come here from Kentucky, Barney Budge, you don't need tellin' how much it means, these days, fer to hev a 'spicion git out that a critter is a revenue spy!"

"Good Lawd!" gasped the bummer, giving a start that almost upset both himself and the stool he was sitting on. "Anybody think—me?"

"I ketched more'n one hint p'intin' that way when down barbecue way," nodded the brigadier, keenly scanning that frightened face.

"But—durn my ornery hide!" helplessly panted Budge.

"An' ef it cuts, don't blame me wuss then you kin help, critter. But ever sence you stuck so close to me—ever sence you come home, an' begun to talk like you did—that same 'spicion has

been workin' its way deeper an' deeper through the fog that fills the skull o' me."

"But you can't even begin to think it, Gener'l Bandy?"

"I tried all I knowed to drive it away, but 'twouldn't go, Barney Budge," still with that low, impressive gravity of tone which impresses one even more deeply than the harshest language. "You fit on my side in the war, an' my heart warms to all sech. You called me comrade. You broke bread, an' eat salt under my ruff-tree. An' so—I *hed* to warn ye, Barney Budge. I *hed* to give ye warnin', though I hate a revenue spy wuss than a massasauga hates a ash bush."

"But I ain't—Good Lawd!"

Barney Budge sprung to his feet in supreme disgust at the bare suspicion, wildly gesticulating with both arms, his tongue seemingly unable to do the subject full justice.

Brigadier Bandy also rose, but his gravity was unchanged, and his tones were not a whit less impressive as he added:

"That was why I burned your map, Barney Budge, fer ef sech was to be found onto ye when ketched—as ketched you shorely will be, ef you don't light out o' these parts in a holy hurry! Ef it was found, I say, they wouldn't be wanted anythin' more to make 'em think it was a holt to ye in huntin' fer secret stills."

"But it was jest a map drawed up by Uncle Jupe!"

"So you say, an' so I'm tryin' to think, Barney; but—"

"I looked to that, or to what it'd fetch to my pocket, to keep me from starvin' in my old age, giner'l," his voice quavering, his manner growin' more pleading as he added: "You burnt up all the clew I hed. You recognized the place, as I could see in the face o' ye when you was studyin' over the map. Now—won't you jest p'int it out to me, Giner'l Bandy? Jest give me a hint so's I kin mebbe find the gold?"

Big Bandy shook his head almost fiercely as he made reply:

"I'd bite the tongue o' me clean off at the roots fu'st—an' then I wouldn't, Barney Budge! Ef the Holler Hill has any secrets, let the Holler Hill keep 'em sacred! An' ef you love life an' a easy neck, comrade, you'll jest lock them jaws fast an' never drap a whimper ontel I kin escort ye safe acrost the county line in the mornin'."

Their eyes met for several seconds, then Barney Budge spoke again:

"That's all you're willin' to do, giner'l? You won't make even so little 'mends fer destroyin' my prope'ty?"

"I'm savin' your neck from a rope, Barney Budge."

"Then, I'll say my best thank'e fer the whisky I've drunk, an' the vittles I've ett inside your house. I'd give 'em all back ef I knowed how, Giner'l Bandy. An' I wish't they hed choked me clean dead wrib the fu'st bite an' sup! Fer then I'd died takin' you to be a honest man, not a robber!" slowly uttered Budge, picking up his hat and turning to the door, out of which he passed without making a sign in answer to the words sent after by his host.

"Wait ontel day, Barney Budge, an' I'll guard ye safe out o' the county. Ef you're ketched runnin' 'round through the night—"

He stood at the door, but ceased speaking as he lost sight of the suspected man in the gloom outside; for though the moon was at its full, the mountain as yet intercepted its rays.

"Ef they ketch him—good-by!"

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW BARNEY BUDGE PLAYED WITH FIRE.

The thought urged him across the threshold, and running forward a few steps, he called aloud upon his recent guest. But only the dull echoes answered, and knowing that in such a wild region pursuit would be worse than useless without light to guide his search, Big Bandy reluctantly turned back to his cabin home.

He paused at the door, gazing moodily into the darkness where he had lost sight of Barney Budge, now and then passing a troubled hand across his forehead.

Although he had experienced one of his most lucid intervals, that day, it was becoming harder for him to think connectedly. His brain was filled with a dull, weary throbbing, which he knew from sad experience almost certainly presaged another of his spells of complete madness, during which he only knew enough to burrow far away from the sight and hearing of his fellow-men.

"Ef I could only drive it off!" he muttered, tossing back his head and flinging aloft his tightly clinched hands. "Ef I could find water or ice cold enough to putt out that turrible burnin'! But—what was it I wanted to do fu'st? What—was—it?"

His fingers clasped his dully throbbing temples with almost savage force. Drops of cold sweat started out so freely that they presently began to trickle down his white beard.

Although each effort caused him intense pain, Big Bandy forced himself to catch at the first clew, then pick up, one after another, each event which had followed after. And slowly, laboriously, he passed in review the events of the day, from the time of his first reaching the

barbecue until he returned to his cabin, in company with Barney Budge.

And as that memory was reached, he gave a gasping cry of intense delight, for he knew the terrible struggle was over; knew that, for once again, he had gained the victory over his madness!

"I've fit it back!" he panted, leaning against the cabin wall as weak and nerveless as though he had been engaged in a long and bitter fight with an equally powerful antagonist.

Twice before in his lifetime—or since his mind was shattered—had he fought that fearful fight, to complete success. And each time the on-creeping madness had left him for weeks after.

During those intervals he could not be said to be mad, though at his best Big Bandy was what is termed "simple."

With those instances fresh in his mind, Big Bandy felt little fear of another relapse, for at least a number of days, and though he now recalled just what he wanted to do, he showed no particular haste in setting about it. He sat down on one of the rude stools, resting his chin between his joined palms as he stared moodily into the heart of the redly glowing coals.

"Ef I'd bin my own self, like I be now," he mused, gloomily, "I'd never let the critter slip through my fingers that way! Not that I'd hurt him my own self. Mebbe 'twas 'long o' some sech bloody work that the Lord sent this bitter cuss upon me! Fer onless a man was a most turrible sinner, surely he wouldn't come to sech punishment as this!"

His head bowed until his face was hidden by his hands. His deformed frame shivered convulsively. Truly, as he said, his punishment was awful to contemplate!

For many minutes Big Bandy sat thus, but then, with a long breath that might be called a sigh, he lifted his head and rose to his feet.

He turned to where his saber habitually rested, and hung it to the belt which he wore beneath his overcoat. This garment was only off his person when in bed, or engaged at some difficult labor.

With the instincts of an old soldier, he looked to the condition of his pistols, making sure all was right with them. Then, after a glance toward the fire, to be sure there was no danger of an accident in that quarter, he left the cabin and walked rapidly away through the night.

By this time the full moon had climbed high enough to partially dispel the gloom which had enveloped Hollow Hill as in a mantle, thus rendering his progress more easy, though he needed it not to show him the proper course to take.

Several times he paused, where the light behind him was the brightest, while his own position was hidden by darkness. As often he looked long and keenly to detect a possible spy along his trail; but as often did he resume his way without making the discovery he dreaded.

"I'm glad of it, fer his sake even more'n my own," he muttered, with a thought of Barney Budge and the ugly suspicions that curious man of Brimstone Butte had awakened, fresh in his mind. "Ef what I said an' done skeered him clean off, so much the better. Fer it's bad work to even dream o' smellin' out the secrets o' Holler Hill—powerful bad work, Barney Budge!"

Shortly after this last pause for watching and listening, Big Bandy came to a narrow cut in the hillside, and with one more suspicious gaze around and behind him, he put a bent finger into his mouth and gave a low, tremulous whistle.

He waited in silence for fully a minute, then repeated the signal, for under the circumstances it could be nothing else.

Still there came no answer, and with a long breath of either relief or confirmed fears, the brigadier took an object from his bosom and with a stout pin fastened it to the trunk of a stunted tree standing among the rocks hard by.

This done, he lingered for a few minutes longer, after which, like one who feels longer delay is only a waste of time, he turned back on his trail and quickly vanished amidst the shadows.

Slowly the minutes crept onward, and when probably a round dozen had been recorded, another shape stole silently from the bushes and advanced to the tree, eagerly plucking from the trunk the object which Big Bandy had pinned to the bark.

"Just a bit of rag!" the new-comer muttered, with an air of disappointment, bending around so as to bring the light of the moon upon the fragment. "Red—black cross painted near the bottom!" he added, as he made so much out. "No more—only that! What does it mean? If it could only talk!"

A sound, real or fancied, sent him swiftly away to cover, where he crouched low, his teeth clinched, his right hand gripping a pistol-butt as he waited and listened. And through the darkness surrounding him, the eyes of Barney Budge shone like the eyes of an angered cat!

"Wrong!" he at length breathed, slightly shifting his cramped limbs. "Thought maybe that old fool was coming back. Fool?" with a low, hardly audible laugh that contained a spiteful sneer. Let others set him down as madman or idiot; I mark him a degree higher—a knave, all the more dangerous because of his simple reputation!"

Barney Budge had improved in his manner of speaking, if in nothing else, since his proud retreat from the "palace" of General Bandy.

He had only gone far enough to make sure he was not being followed by the brigadier, then circled around until at a point from whence he could keep guard over the cabin and its inmate. He felt almost certain that Big Bandy was an ally of the moonshiners for whose secrets he was playing such a dangerous game, and believing that he had given the brigadier ample cause for suspecting him of being a spy, he hoped for much what was actually to take place.

And a with silent chuckle at his own acuteness, Barney Budge set off along the trail of the mountaineer, hoping to in the end win his longed-for reward.

He was mentally reviewing this, and then pondering over the nature of the curious signal which he had stolen from the tree-trunk, when the clatter of a loosened stone at no great distance warned him to lie close under cover.

Almost immediately therea' ter he caught the indistinct hum of human voices, and now and then an ugly curse as an unwary foot slipped, to the injury of its owner's limbs.

From his covert, which was the same into which he had stolen when Big Bandy awaited an answer to his guarded signal. Barney Budge saw several dark figures drawing nearer, then pausing while still hidden partially by the shadows. He strained his ears in hopes of catching a word or so to give him some definite information, but without success.

He heard a repetition of the tremulous whistle given not many minutes earlier by the brigadier, but as then, no reply was made. And then a single man passed on to the tree, either to leave a warning or to search for one.

Once more the eager spy was doomed to disappointment. The figure was muffled in an army overcoat, with felt hat slouched so as to completely shade his face. And he searched the trunk without uttering a word, then turned back to rejoin his mates.

Once there, he spoke, but only a guarded murmur reached the ears of the spy, who dared not attempt to change his covert for one more advantageous. Before him, between his biding-place and the shadow where the strangers stood, lay a broad belt of bright moonshine, to cross which would invite certain detection.

So, chafing hotly at his unfortunate choice of position, Barney Budge watched his game climb still further up the hillside, then vanish from sight on what he felt must be a narrow ledge, probably containing the entrance to one of the many caves and caverns which had given Brimstone Butte its alternative title of Hollow Hill.

When satisfied on this point, since nothing more was seen of his game, he left his covert, and by a roundabout course, drew nearer the ledge—only to sink low, with a stifled curse, as he caught the sputtering light of a match which was being ignited to enable the man on guard duty to light his pipe.

He could see the flame, but an intervening bunch of leaves shielded the face of the guard from his eager eyes. And before he could exchange his position for one more favorable, the match expired, and only the dull glow of the burning tobacco remained to guide his sight.

Another fierce, hungry oath was smothered in its birth. Truly, favored by chance as he had been at the start, Barney Budge began to believe fortune had indeed deserted him for the night!

From where he lay, he knew it would be impossible for him to surprise the man on watch, should he see no other hope of learning what he had fixed his stubborn mind upon. But might not the other end of the ledge offer better facilities? Or—were there no means of seeing and hearing the men inside that cavern, without resorting to such extremities?

There might be such a chance, from all he had gleaned concerning the Hollow Hill, and as he could easiest gain a position near the further end of that ledge, by crossing over above, rather than below, where he would naturally run greater risk of being seen by the guard, Barney Budge silently wriggled his way backward until hidden from possible discovery in that direction, then crept along the course mentally laid out beforehand.

Thanks to the nature of the ground further up the hillside, the spy was obliged to go up until he reached what seemed to be the top of that knoll, but which was really an irregular shelf several hundred feet lower than the extreme top of Brimstone Butte. But he shortly after felt in duty bound to congratulate himself on having been forced to alter his plans.

He stopped short, lifting his head and sniffing with quivering nostrils, much as a pointer will on striking the first faint scent of a close-lying game-bird.

Surely he had caught—Yes! There was the unmistakable scent of burning wood!

Back and forth he crept along the ledge, almost despairing of success as the minutes rolled by without his finding what he sought; but just when he felt the least hopeful, the longed-for discovery was made!

And ten seconds later, Barney Budge was crouching on his knees, his head and shoulders

thrust into an irregular hole in the rocks, his gaze wandering swiftly, hungrily over the faces and forms of a number of armed men below him!

And as each sentence spoken floated upward, he recorded it on his brain for future use, so interested that he never thought of danger—

Until a heavy weight dropped on his back, and he felt himself falling!

CHAPTER XVII.

GILBERT COCHRANE'S DILEMMA.

"THEN I'll go out white!"

Gilbert Cochrane nodded assent to this grim declaration, but it was more mechanical than enthusiastic. The sentiment that crisp sentence contained was, no doubt, most admirable, but—

"It means political ruin, Hooper!"

"All right. I'll have private honor left in its place."

Boldly, firmly though he spoke, it was plain to see that Sheriff Hooper acutely felt the awkward situation into which he had been cast without a single day's warning. His unusually pale face betrayed something of what was passing in his mind, but keenly though Cochrane eyed his guest, he could not detect even the faintest symptom of yielding, of what is called policy.

"Well, sheriff, if we've got to die, we'll go down with flying colors," he laughed, with the air of one who abandons a forlorn hope. "And now—to bed! You've got to catch up with lost time, John, for I'm mighty certain you never slept much last night!"

Sheriff Hooper winced sharply at those words, though the allusion to his terrible ordeal was made in such a tone and manner that he could not possibly take offense at it.

"Don't go to any trouble on my account, Cochrane," he said, quickly putting out a hand as his host rose from his seat. "Lord love you, lad! I could drop down and sleep like a log, anywhere—even on my old nag, for that matter!"

"Don't mention it, sheriff. Not the slightest trouble. And then, if you're in for the war, better be in good fighting condition at the start, if you hope to come out on top."

"I don't know as I do hope it," with a return of his moodiness. "They've got me surrounded, and whichever way I turn I find a masked battery all ready to open up at my first move!"

"Then—why not save your hot shot for the most dangerous, because most secret, enemies, Hooper?" slowly asked Cochrane, lingering, hoping against hope that he might at last prevail over that iron will.

"You mean?"

"That if there is any moonshining going on in this county to-day, sheriff, it is on so small a scale that the Government will never feel the loss."

"Then you admit there is moonshining going on, Cochrane?"

"I said 'if there was.' It is possible, of course, though I wouldn't give you a ray of information if I had any quantity of it, sheriff. I'd rather help the sinner than the saint, in this case, old friend," with a short laugh which helped take the sting out of his words.

"I'm not blaming you, Cochrane. Nor am I trying to pump you. What I wanted was to make you understand that I'm going to do my sworn duty, or drop off the roll in the trying. Now—where shall I bunk in?"

"Come with me, old fellow," offering an arm as the sheriff rose to his feet with an effort that showed how his limbs were stiffening as a natural sequence to his frightful ride.

Gilbert assisted Hooper up the broad, easy flight of stairs, taking him to a comfortable chamber at the rear of the spacious building, explaining that he would be less liable to disturbance than if he occupied a front room.

"And, now, sheriff, while you are waiting—I'll play valet for the occasion, unless you prefer the services of old Pomp—"

"Don't bother, please. I ain't fit for even a nigger to see."

"All right. Just keep your eyes open for a minute, and I'll bring you a hot night-cap, warranted to fit without a wrinkle, and to bring its wearer sweet dreams by wholesale!" laughed Cochrane, gently assisting the sorely bruised and battered man to remove his clothes.

This done, and again begging Hooper not to fall asleep before his return with the promised "night-cap," Gilbert ran quickly down-stairs to his office, and mixed a strong draught in a goblet. Then, from a secret compartment in his desk, he produced a vial containing a white powder, a portion of which he dropped into the steaming compound, stirring the liquor briskly until the powder was entirely dissolved.

"He needs sleep badly, but no worse than I want him to have it!" he muttered, with a grim smile, leaving the room and hastening back to the chamber now occupied by the sheriff.

"Flag of truce, John Hooper!" he called out laughingly, holding up the goblet as he saw the sheriff start up in bed, one hand gripping the pistol which lay on a chair close by the bedside. "Don't waste a shot on your friends, sheriff!"

Hooper mumbled an apology, and emptied the

goblet which Cochrane held to his lips, without stopping to taste its flavor. And his head sunk back on the grateful pillow, sleep overtaking him even while he was trying to tell Gilbert not to let him lie too long.

"Poor fellow!" mused Cochrane, gazing into the face of his guest, now showing more plainly the full effects of that frightful ordeal. "It looks mighty like playing him dirt, but what else can I do?"

Drawing down the shades, Cochrane silently left the room, closing the door gently behind him. And shutting himself up in the office from whence he had escorted his friend, he paced slowly back and forth, his drooping head and pale face showing how hard he found it to decide upon his proper course of action.

Like many another honest man whose lot had been cast in sections where the steam horse had not or could not penetrate, Gilbert Cochrane looked with a lenient eye on that small class of law-breakers known as "moonshiners."

He knew that for generations past the mountaineers had been used to working up their surplus grain into whisky, which could be so much more readily transported to a market, as well as more promptly disposed of when taken there. For many years not a word had been said against this manner of life, and the new dispensation was hard to understand by those rude, illiterate men, who were simply living the life their fathers led before them.

At the utmost, their transgressions amounted to but a few dollars each per year; a mere trifling to the Government, but all the difference between starving and living to many of the mountaineers.

Knowing this, because he lived in the midst of just such men, Gilbert Cochrane had always been in sympathy for the law-breakers, rather than the law-enforcers.

Then, too, he had grave reason to think that Luke Barnes was even now interested in illicit distilling.

"It only needs this last straw!" he reflected, his brows contracted and his eyes filled with anxiety. "I couldn't do less than stand by Hooper. Alone, abused, I'd have been a cur not to have helped him as far as I have. But—if he keeps his oath, if he jumps on the moonshiners with both feet, as his orders run, how will they regard me?"

No need to ask the question, for only too well he knew the answer. He would be classed as John Hooper's aid and backer, beyond a doubt!

That might mean death to himself, but he never gave that fact a second thought. He was thinking of Luke Barnes and the girl whom he loved so passionately. How would they be affected?

If Luke Barnes was not so bitterly prejudiced against him already by that luckless loss of the property left by Kenneth Barbour in care of his body-servant, Uncle Jupe, matters might be a little more easily arranged.

"I'd give ten times the worth of his place if I'd only met Myra before sending him the word I did!" he mused, gloomily. "But to change now would make matters even worse. Barnes would be more than ever convinced that I was a rascal, who had tried my level best to gouge him out of his rights."

Truly it was an awkward dilemma in which Gilbert Cochrane found himself, and no matter which way he might turn, what course he might elect to follow, any move at all bade fair to leave the situation just so much the worse.

"If I give them warning, I'm going back on an honest man and true friend in John Hooper; worse, maybe, for they'll not hesitate to burn powder in defense of their stills!"

"If I keep my peace, the sheriff will—curse the crooked luck! I've got to give Barnes a hint, let the cost be what it may!"

He went to his desk and wrote rapidly for a few moments, then put the slip of paper in an envelope and sealed it closely. He left the outer covering blank as he sat staring at it, trying to decide on his next step.

At length he slipped the envelope into a breast pocket, caught up his hat and hastily left the office.

At the front door, he found Pomp, and curtly spoke:

"The sheriff is asleep in the north chamber, and on no account must he be disturbed. If any one calls, tell them I am not at home. If the sheriff is asked for, say that you have seen nothing of him. You understand?"

"Dey ain't no such pusson in de house, Marse Gilbert."

"Stick to that, Pomp, or you'll lose your place. And, mind you, the sheriff is on no account to leave the house until I get back. If he should wake up and call, answer him. But if he offers to leave his room, tell him that I said no! Tell him that it will be ruin to all our hopes if he leaves before he sees me again. You understand?"

The negro repeated his instructions, and really having little fear but what the drug, added to his bodily exhaustion, would keep Hooper fast locked in slumber until broad day, Cochrane saddled his horse and rode rapidly away from home.

His face hardly looked like that of a lover who hoped soon to meet the girl he meant to make his wife, but despite his gloomy, anxious looks, Gilbert Cochrane was heading for the home of Luke Barnes. But with all his impatient anxiety, he did not entirely lose sight of prudence.

Half-an-hour's rapid riding carried him to the vicinity of the Barnes' location, when he moderated his pace, turning out of the road and picking his way through the fairly thick forest for some little distance before finally drawing rein. Dismounting, he hitched his horse to a pendent bough, then resumed his journey on foot, soon reaching a point from whence he could gain a fair view of both the cabin and the spring where—though of course he could not know that—Myra had not many hours before held such a trying interview with his rival.

For some little time he saw no signs of life about the place, unless in the thin thread of smoke which curled upward from the stone chimney, but he had a fair stock of patience when once fairly set on a certain course, and maintained his watch.

Though he saw no signs of Luke being about the place, he did not want to openly call at the house. Mrs. Barnes would certainly be at home, and in her presence he could not well tell Myra why he made that visit. And so, hoping and praying that the girl might go down to the spring, he waited and watched.

Fortune seemed to favor him, at length, for he saw Myra, wooden bucket on an arm, leave the house and slowly pass along to the spring.

Gilbert only waited long enough to make sure of her destination, then hastened around until the trees growing near the spring shut off all view from the house. And under this cover he ran forward calling out in low but eager tones as the girl started at his footfalls:

"Wait—don't run, Miss Barnes! I mean only good to you and yours, I assure you!"

"But—mother will be waiting for—"

"Only a minute—I'll not detain you longer, Myra," by this time near enough to catch her reluctant hand, which, before she could prevent him, was pressed ardently to his lips. "Can you forgive me for what I did this forenoon, Myra?"

"You didn't—Jasper forced it on you, Mr. Cochrane."

"I should have borne it more patiently until you were away. Only I knew—he would have told you I held back because of cowardice!"

"It is past—forget it, as I am trying to do. I am not blaming you, Mr. Cochrane, though it hurt me terribly. For—everybody knew that you were fighting about—about me," stammered the maiden.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A THANKLESS TASK.

"MYR' ELLEN! hav you clean fergot what I sent ye fur, or hes the spring gone off to the barbecue?"

Only for that sharp interruption, it is hard to say just what Gilbert Cochrane would have done and said in his eagerness to dry those star ing tears in the big blue eyes he loved so dearly.

"I must go—mother is waiting," murmured Myra, stooping to pick up the filled bucket; but the young man as quickly interposed a hand, hurriedly saying:

"A moment, Myra. I came to warn you of approaching trouble."

"To whom?"

"To me, certainly; to your father, possibly, Myra, unless he will accept a friendly warning from my hand."

"More trouble? Haven't we had enough already?"

There was a tinge of bitterness in both voice and eyes as the girl looked squarely up into his face. Gilbert flushed hotly, for he could not mistake her meaning. Truly, as she hinted, trouble black and sore had come upon that family through his actions.

"I know—you feel hard toward me, Myra," he said, huskily, yet with that old, familiar compression of his firm lips. "If I had met and learned to know you before I sent that word to your father, it would never have been spoken. I would have given all my property, sooner than you should learn to hate me!"

"We only stood out for our rights, Mr. Cochrane," was the proud reply, as she once more stooped to take up her burden.

"Wait—give me a chance, if not to clear myself in your sight, at least to warn you of danger threatening—"

"You, Myr' Ellen Barnes!" came that impatient voice once more. "Ef you don't mog this way in a mighty hurry, I'll come to see the reason why not! I want that water, I tell ye!"

"Will you come back as soon as you can, Myra?" he hastily asked.

A hot flush leaped to her cheeks, and there was an indignant glow in the eyes that met his so squarely when she made answer:

"I will not. Why should I, Mr. Cochrane? Let me pass!"

"Then—for your father's sake, Myra?" he added, taking the envelope from his breast and forcing it into her reluctant hand as he added:

"Hide that, and keep it sacredly, Myra, until you learn that trouble or misfortune has overtaken me. Then take it to town, and hand it to Mark Wycherley, the lawyer. And, I beg of you, Myra, remember just what day I placed the letter in your hands. Will you?"

"I'm comin' down after ye, Myr' Ellen Barnes!"

"Promise!" earnestly said Gilbert, picking up the bucket of water.

"I promise—don't—"

"I must, Miss Barnes," with a faint smile as he quickly stepped out from behind the trees, in full view of the angry housewife standing in the open door. "I came to give your father a warning, and since you decline to give me time, I must speak before your mother."

The confused, frightened girl, hardly knowing what she was doing, ran quickly past him along the path, only stopping long enough to utter a few words to her mother before she disappeared inside the house.

"I didn't know—he wants to speak to you, mother!"

"Then it's mighty one-sided, fer I jest don't an' won't speak to the likes o' him!" spluttered the angry matron, as she spread her ample form as a barricade against admittance.

"Where shall I set the bucket, Mrs. Barnes?" quietly asked Gilbert Cochrane, just as though he had not caught that forbidding speech. "As I wished to say a word or two to you, and chanced along by the spring, I took the liberty of assisting your daughter with her burden."

"Set it down right whar you be, Gil Cochrane! They ain't room 'nough in my house fer a man o' your mighty bigness—no they ain't, now!"

Gilbert obeyed, his face grave, and his eyes bearing a troubled light as they steadily met that angry glare.

"I know how you feel, Mrs. Barnes, and if I could look at the matter from your standpoint, I might feel much the same."

"An' ef they was even the ghost of a man left into ye, sir, you wouldn't crowd yourself in whar your comp'ny isn't wanted!"

Gilbert smiled faintly. It was not such an agreeable task he had set himself that he would eagerly court such a reception. But he knew his mission must be performed, let the consequences to himself be what they might.

"I came to tell Mr. Barnes that there is trouble brewing, but—"

"Trouble? Then it don't need a witch to see who fetches it. You hev given us nothin' but trouble ever sence the eend of the war brung you here, like a car'on crow, to fatten on—Will you jest take yourself off, Gilbert Cochrane, afore I clean forget that I'm a woman an'a Christian?"

"As soon as I have done my duty, Mrs. Barnes. Is your husband at home?"

"My man's away, an' right well you knowed that, Gil Cochrane, or never a foot would you dare to set onto the land you're tryin' your level wu'st to steal from them as rightfully owns it—so thar!"

"You are harder on me than is just or Christian-like, Mrs. Barnes, and the day may come when you will see this yourself," he said, in low, almost sorrowful tones.

"When you've driv' us out o' house an' home?" with an almost hysterical laugh of scorn.

"You know what I said: the title deeds to this farm are waiting for Luke's acceptance. Only one little word of—"

"I'd bite the tongue o' me out fu'st! An' so would my man, her father, twicet over! An' now, ef I cain't drive you off, I kin shet the do' in the evil face o' ye, Gil Cochrane!"

She seemed on the point of stepping back and slamming the door shut, but he quickly cried out:

"Luke is in danger, Mrs. Barnes, and if you refuse to hear me out, he may be the unlucky one to suffer most through your haste."

"Danger? My man? What do you mean, Gil Cochrane?"

Her florid face turned as pale as the coating of tan would admit, and her voice quavered as she spoke. Whatever her faults, Mrs. Barnes was a true wife and mother; she loved her kin more than herself.

"I'm sorry to tell you, but I fear he is," was his slow response. "I may be wrong; he may not be mixed up in the trouble at all. God knows I sincerely hope so!"

"What trouble? Speak out, cain't you, man alive!"

"The district attorney is all stirred up, and swears that he must have all laws enforced, or lose his office. And so— Well, he has sent out strict orders to break up every still in the county, and to arrest every man engaged, or even suspected of being engaged, in making moonshine whisky."

Mrs. Barnes was paler than ever now, but her face was rigid as a mass of stone. Not a muscle quivered or altered to betray her. And when she spoke, it was with a short, contemptuous laugh:

"Is that your mighty mar's-nest, Gil Cochrane?"

"I thought it only right to let Luke know of the coming trouble."

"Then your thought was a fool's thought. Then you've tuck all this trouble an' wasted all this time fer wuss than naught. Go your way, Gil Cochrane, fer 'twon't do ye no good comin' with your rev'nue spy tricks 'bout this clearin'! My man, indeed!"

This time Mrs. Barnes slammed the door shut in fair earnest, and hardly knowing just what to think, beyond the indisputable fact that he had nothing to hope for by lingering longer, Gilbert Cochrane turned away and walked slowly back to where he had hidden his horse.

The sun had set, and it was rapidly growing dark, for the full moon would not rise for some little time, and the haze of Indian summer put a thin vail over the dimly twinkling stars.

Mounting his horse, Cochrane slowly rode back to the road, then hesitated which direction to choose.

He had no positive proof that Luke Barnes was or had recently been engaged in illicit stilling, though he strongly suspected that he held some sort of interest in one or more, which general belief located somewhere on or in Brimstone Butte, with its numerous caves and intricate passages.

Only for his love for Myra, he would not have taken the risk of delivering such a warning, for the very fact of his knowing so much would almost certainly be received by the suspicious mountaineers that if not an actual spy, he was taking a prominent part in the contemplated raid. Then, too, his giving aid and shelter to Sheriff Hooper, who was such an uncompromising enemy to all law-breakers, still further increased his danger.

"Lucky if I don't get a knife between my ribs, or a blue pill through my brain-pan!" he muttered, with a short, hard laugh.

A touch of the keen spur sent his good horse forward, not toward home, but in the direction of the Hollow Hill.

"If Luke Barnes isn't interested in the mix, others just as white surely are!" was his decision. "I know Jasper Naughton is one of the party, and though he hates me worse than poison, I'll never leave him free to say that I helped hunt him down, without giving him a chance to get out of the scrape!"

Although he had never taken part in violating the law, as so many of his neighbors had, it was from no conscientious scruples, so far as the making of free whisky was concerned. Like thousands of others, he held that a man had the right to do what he pleased with the product of his own toil. As a war measure, the tax was well enough, lacking a better method of raising the necessary funds. But the war was over, and all men were proclaimed free and equal in the eye of the law. Then why bear down more heavily on the poor mountaineer than on the rich citizen?

Sympathizing with the moonshiners as he did, Cochrane had never paid their secret stills a visit, and though he firmly believed that the Hollow Hill was being utilized for this purpose, and though he had an accurate idea of where at least one still was located, he could not say for certainty. Yet, taking the chances of not going astray, he was now riding toward Brimstone Butte, trusting to luck for some chance to give his friends warning of approaching trouble, without too deeply implicating John Hooper.

"They must know it is his sworn duty. And knowing that, they ought to be white enough not to visit on the tool, the punishment which belongs to those who order him to do such dirty work, or on the Government it-self!"

Having settled this point in his mind, Gilbert naturally enough drifted to thinking of another, vastly more important to him. Was he on the right road? Was he not losing his last faint chance of winning Myra Barnes for a wife?

If he had only known in time! But he had taken the step which forbade a retreat, and right or wrong, he would press on in the line he had marked out for himself at first.

"I'll win her, or die trying!" was his frequently-repeated vow.

Never more earnest than now, while riding to warn those who might shoot him down at sight, as a contemptible revenue spy!

"Naughton would jump at the chance, and all the county would applaud him for so doing—worse luck me!" he muttered, with a short, metallic laugh.

Fully realizing this ugly truth, Cochrane did not disdain to use great precaution as he drew near to the foot of Brimstone Butte, dismounting from and hitching his horse in a secluded nook, where it was hardly likely any prowler would chance across it, then stealing forward on foot.

Instead of deciding to cross the little river, or creek, at the regular ford, which might be guarded in case his suspicions of a night meeting of the moonshiners proved correct, Cochrane aimed to strike the stream at a point somewhat lower down.

And just as he caught a faint glimpse of the water, reflecting the full moon, he also caught sight of two human figures on a broad rock overhanging a deep pool. And as he paused, he distinctly heard the words:

"Say your pravers, critter, fer your time is up! I hate mighty to do it, but—you know too mighty much to live any longer!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A MEETING OF THE MOONSHINERS.

If Luke Barnes was not fully satisfied with the explanation given him by Green Gentry concerning the manner in which that gentleman had gained possession of the papers addressed to Sheriff John Hooper, he made no open display of the fact. Nor did he show that he suspected either of his present companions of having taken part in sending the sheriff on his lonesome ride.

He already knew more than was prudent, to a man in his situation, and only wished he could see a way through the woods.

"Waal, I knowed he was meaner'n hog-wash," at length said Jasper Naughton, after trying to digest the dangerous points given them by the yellow-bearded man. "But I never set him up fer a pure, clean, unadulterated fool until right this day."

"Heap sight more knave than fool, Jasper," grimly nodded Gentry.

"Then you reckon—it's jest a bluff? Or don't he 'low to make a racket ontel the 'lection is over?"

"You don't know the stuff he's made of, Jasper, or you'd never ask a fool question like that. He'll buckle down to work the quickest he knows how, after his dainty bit of a pleasure ride."

"An ugly bit o' work!" gloomily repeated Luke Barnes.

"Might have been better for us if the fellows bad made cleaner work of it—that's so!" nodded Gentry, stretching his arms and yawning heartily. "But they didn't, and Hooper is very much on deck. And, right or wrong, he'll lay the trick at our—at the door of the moonshiners. Which is as much to say that he'll make a haul or bu'st his breeching!"

"The boys ought to know what's up, think?" hesitated Naughton.

"I've dropped a hint to all, and now you two know what's in the wind, all done but getting together for a talk it over. Just that, Luke Barnes," with a sharp nod as the gaunt squatter gave an uneasy start.

"But—you hearn me say I 'lowed to drop out o' the gang, the last time we met up together, cap'n."

"I know. There would have been no objections raised, though you're a mighty good man to have about the place, Luke, but—well, you ought to understand what sort of temper the boys'll be in when they know just what's coming. If you fall off just at this time, how many will ask was it fear, or money that drove you?"

"You don't dast to even hint it that way, Gentry!"

"No, but I've got a cooler head than most of the men tote on their shoulders, Luke, and I can look at a thing without prejudice. But they—Well, you've got to attend the meeting with us, to-night, Barnes, or have some mighty ugly words slung out this way."

There was a brief silence, during which, while staring moodily at the ground before him, Luke Barnes was doing considerable thinking.

He could fully appreciate the blunt hints thrown out by Green Gentry. He knew, too, that if he failed to perform the duty allotted him by this man, who was really head and front of their roughly organized company, Gentry would be the first and most bitter to hint at corruption in connection with his name, even if he did not flatly accuse him of being that most detestable—from the mountaineer standpoint—of all wretches, a revenue spy!

The mere suspicion would be more than enough to brand him a black sheep in the eyes of all his associates. They would not only hate and shun his company, but they might—

A little shiver crept over him as he cast a quick glance toward his humble home. What would become of his women, should a bullet find his life before the cloud on his title was fairly cleared away?

Gentry detected that shiver, and feeling that matters were working just as he would have them, turned toward Jasper Naughton and engaged him in brisk conversation, only in part bearing on the matter lately in hand.

True, Jasper asked him what was to be done, and Gentry answered that he had given their friends a hint to be punctual at the rendezvous that evening, luckily having found all save one or two of their number in attendance at the barbecue.

"They'll be on hand, and I told 'Gene Fuller to leave early enough to drop a hint in Matney's ear as he rode by. We'll find the whole family on hand, never fear."

"Will we go from here?"

"Unless Luke kicks us off the place as unfit for a gentleman to associate with on equal terms," laughed Gentry. "You know we're moonshiners, and he has retired from business."

"I wanted to, beca'se my woman don't like the doin's," quietly said Barnes. "Then they ain't b'in much money into it of late days. But ontel I'm told I'm free to step out, without a single voice to speak ag'in my doin' of it, I'm one o' the gang, Green Gentry."

"Then you'll go with us, old fellow?"

"You know I will, 'thout axin'."

"Good enough! And so—if you don't mind asking your lady to just set out a cold bite—"

"She's cookin' grub, but I'll hurry it up ef you want."

"Well, yes. We'd better ride around by way of Woods's, and I wouldn't like to be late getting to the rendezvous. So—just a bite, tell her, Barnes."

Thus it was that Gilbert Cochrane found only the women-folk at home when he made his visit, though the sun had not yet set.

Immediately after a hasty meal, Luke Barnes saddled one of his work-horses—for lack of a better mount—and in company with his two dangerous friends, set out on what was to prove a most memorable trip for him.

As Gentry had hinted, considerable time was lost by their riding on a cross-road to drop the ugly news into the ear of one of their number, who had been prevented from attending the barbecue, but who was not sick enough to refuse to leave his bed and dress for the ride to Brimstone Butte, when he learned what important business was on hand.

Resuming their trip, the quartette naturally paired off, and Jasper Naughton found a chance to speak a few words in private to Luke Barnes, frankly confessing what had passed between Myra and himself at the spring that evening, and begging the father to "set his foot down" to some purpose without longer delay.

"As I told her, I've got a home big 'nough fer us all, ef Gil Cochrane boosts ye out o' yer rights. An' ef Myr' Ellen—"

"Let it drap fer now, Naughton. I can't make no more promises ontel this nasty mess is straightened out," moodily said the squatter.

"But ef you'd jest tell Myr' Ellen she'd got to knuckle—"

"Let it drap, I tell ye over ag'in, Jap Naughton!"

There was a dangerous ring to that tone, and the younger man sulkily took warning before a bad matter was made worse.

By this time the raiders were drawing near Brimstone Butte, and that this was by no means the first time a night ride of that sort had been taken, the manner of the horses proved, for of their own accord they left the road and passed into the gloomy timber.

A low, quavering whistle came floating through the darkness, and Gentry immediately imitated the sound. Then two men rose from the bushes not far ahead, with low, friendly greetings.

"Matney, is it, Fuller?" asked Gentry, peering through the gloom.

"Nothin' shorter, cap'n. We've bin waitin' quite a little few."

"Had to pick up Woods. Time enough, though, since none of the rest have put in an appearance. We'll hitch, gentlemen, and get along to the rendezvous. The others'll not keep us waiting long, I don't reckon."

These were the men whom Barney Budge watched from his place of espial, and it was Green Gentry who searched the tree-trunk for a possible warning from one of the gang's many friends.

Gentry led the way up the hillside to the little ledge, and his head was the first one that bowed to pass into the dark hole in the rocks, behind that leafy screen of vine-clad bushes. The others followed him, and though the gloom was palpable, they showed no hesitation in making their way to a fairly spacious cavern, where Gentry struck a match and lit a lantern.

By its dim light, he inspected each face, then bidding some of the others start a fire, he told off 'Gene Fuller to keep guard at the mouth of the cavern, adding:

"Lay low, of course, and don't pass a soul unless you know he belongs to the inner circle. Understand?"

"Bet I do, cap'n!" grunted the moonshiner, picking up his rifle once more, then shuffling away to take his post.

Naughton and Matney had kindled a fire, using the material which had been stored up at odd times, for that purpose, and gradually the red glow began to fairly illuminate the cavern, throwing their figures into strong relief, and making their rugged faces still more stern in seeming.

Gentry scrutinized each face in turn for a brief space, then said:

"Shall I wait until all have arrived, or shall I let you know something of the trouble that is brewing for us, gentlemen?"

"I'd say now, cap'n," spoke up Woods, hovering over the fire until it seemed as though his garments must certainly ignite. "I'm interested as deep as anybody, I reckon, but if my chills come back ag'in, it's mighty little listenin' I kin do then, fer my teeth rattlin'!"

"All right," with a grim laugh. "The news'll bear repeating when the others come, and you're one of our pick, Woods. So—the sheriff is just more'n bent on going for us moonshiners!"

Then Gentry went on to tell much the same story he had ventilated at the Barnes clearing, giving the same account of the fortunate manner in which he had gained the important knowledge, and winding up by producing the papers themselves, and condensing the contents as the surest method of reaching their understanding.

"You see, gentlemen, it isn't only the sheriff

that's stirring up the mud, but the district attorney is egging him on. And the State Attorney is shoving him forward with a sharp stick. And—worst of all! the Government is taking a hand in!"

"Fer why?" almost fiercely broke forth Luke Barnes, his worst passions deeply stirred by long brooding over his real or fancied wrongs. "Durn a Gov'ment that lets 'portant matters go to rack an' ruin, yit sticks its foxy nose in honest men's business! What is it to the Gov'ment, I want to know? Hain't a critter the right to do what he wants with his own raisin'? Ef he grows a weenty bit more co'n then he kin eat up, humans an' critters, must he let it go rot? Ef he hain't got no market nigh 'nough fer to sell at, fer as much as it costs him to tote it thar, shell the Gov'ment say: 'Durn fool you fer hevin' more'n 'nough co'n than'll keep ye from starvin'! What the likes o' you want o' money? What the likes o' you hev to do with store truck? What ef ye do hev to go stark naked? Don't ye live in the woods, an' hain't ye low-down, ornery critters that didn't ought to hev nothin'?"

"That's what the Gov'ment says, an' I say—durn sech a Gover'ment!"

Others chimed in with much the same argument, but Green Gentry listened to each in turn, in silence, with a cruel smile playing about his bearded lips. And as Luke Barnes chanced to look into his face when the ruddy glow fairly crossed it, a new fear assailed him. As by instinct he felt that Gentry was holding back other, perhaps even more important information.

"Thar's more abind all this, cap'n," he said, at length, taking advantage of the slight bustle attending the entrance of several more members of the gang. "I kin see it in the two eyes o' ye, man!" with subdued anger. "Out with it in a lump, ef thar's wuss to come!"

"There is still worse to come, gentlemen," slowly sweeping his redly-glowing gaze over each face in turn. "I said that the Government itself was stirring in this matter, but it isn't moonshine alone that is answerable for that."

"What is, then?" demanded Luke Barnes, his gaunt visage very pale, his tones harsh beyond the ordinary as he asked that question.

"Well, they reckon we're making money faster than the law allows, or than the present price of moonshine admits!"

CHAPTER XX.

LUKE BARNES DRAWS THE LINE.

"WHAT!" ejaculated Jasper Naughton, who had maintained silence up to this point. "You don't mean to say—"

"That the Secret Service has got wind of our best paying work? But that's just what I do mean to say, gentlemen," said Gentry, with a short, ugly laugh. "Some one has sold us out, or else their cursed spies has struck the right trail in catching hold of some of our merchandise. Just that, gentlemen!"

There was a brief period of silence, during which the men, pale-faced and in a measure awed by this startling hint, interchanged looks of doubt and dawning suspicion.

Of all present, perhaps Luke Barnes was the one who seemed least moved, outwardly, though his eyes glowed redly in the firelight as he confronted the leader, slowly saying:

"I al'ays talked ag'inst your goin' into sech ugly business, Green Gentry. I told ye it was too resky fer pore critters like the heft o' us be, who hain't no backin' nur 'fluence to ward off danger when it lit down onto us—as it was dead sart'in to do, soon or late. From the very fu'st hint, I talked all I knowed how ag'inst it, an' tole ye all out flat I wouldn't hev no hand into the like!"

Gentry laughed sneeringly, as the gaunt squatter came to a pause, more through lack of breath than because he had done the subject justice.

"That's all very nice, Luke, but you're just as deep in the mud as we are in the mire."

"Do you dast even hint I ever laid a finger to that ugly work?" sternly demanded Barnes. "Did I ever take even a cent o' the stuff?"

"You belong to the family, Luke Barnes. And if—as you seem to think—we are ever arrested, and brought to trial, do you reckon either judge or jury would believe any such talk? Would they believe you such a fool as to belong to the gang, yet not profit by the work that gang done?"

"B'lieve it or not, it's the gospel truth!"

"I'm not denying that, Luke," with an ugly scowl that showed his teeth for an instant. "But this isn't the time for splitting hairs. The main point is this: we're in great danger, and all who are not with us, are plainly against us."

An ugly murmur ran from lip to lip, and as Luke Barnes glanced around that little circle, he caught more than one suspicious glare.

The entrance of two more men, they making the circle complete, gave the squatter a chance to think over his unfortunate position; and by the time matters had been hastily explained to the new-comers, he had partially formed his line of action.

After his own fashion, he was a brave fellow enough, and when once his mind was set, no ordinary obstacle could turn it to one side or the other. And speaking to Gentry, by virtue of his office as chief, he tried to make his position fully understood.

"You know, cap'n, as the rest do, that I've been ag'inst this ugly part o' the business. You know that I wanted to draw out o' even the moonshinin', ruther then be mixed up in t'other, even in seemin'. But you all said we could keep the two things sep'rit, an' I, like a blind fool as I begin to see, now, I didn't stick out fer goin', as I should."

"That question is old, Luke Barnes. The point now is—are you going to try to save your own neck at the cost of sacrificing all the others?"

"Go a little slow, Gentry," said Jasper Naughton, coming to the front, now matters were assuming such an ugly shape. "Barnes is right. He warned us that we was playin' with fire that'd burn us right smart afore it was putt out. He never tuck a hand in the work, though he was al'ays to the front when anythin' wanted to be done with the stills."

"It isn't what he has done, but what he's going to do, that I'm trying to get at, first off," frowned Gentry.

"That's easy told, cap'n," said Luke, quietly, but with an undercurrent of dogged resolution that could not be mistaken. "I'll do my sheer when it comes to moonshinin'. I'm willin' 'nough to break a bad law like that, but I'll never go ag'in a good an' honest one. I'll never take a finger in counterfeitin', ef ye kill me fer holdin' out!"

"Think twicet afore ye say or do it, Green Gentry!" sharply cried Jasper Naughton, stepping in between the two men as he fancied the crisis had come. "Luke is just as white as they make 'em, cap'n. He'll do his part o' the work with the best of us, ef a spy drops down on us. Say you'll back me up in this, Luke—say it, man!"

"Fur as the whisky goes, I'll back ye up. I'll fight fer the stills, and no man'll dare go furder that way then I will. But," his low voice growing harder and sterner as he went on: "I draw the line at makin' counterfeits!"

As those stern, resolute words crossed his lips, Luke Barnes drew his muscular figure erect, his hard hands clinched, his face as pale as his natural and acquired swarthiness would permit. For he saw that Green Gentry had suddenly grown unusually pale: that his eyes were glowing luridly, while a hand rested on the ready butt of a heavy revolver.

He fully anticipated a shot or a blow before he could complete his speech, and he knew that if either came, he could hardly hope to ever leave that den with life in his body.

Not only was Green Gentry a dangerous adversary for any man, but of all those present, he could not count on one hand to help him, unless love for Myra should urge Jasper Naughton to lend him aid.

Although his gaze was fixed immovably on the face of the chief, he knew, as by instinct, that nearly every other man present was watching him with growing suspicion in their eyes. And no man knew better what a spy or a traitor had to expect at those hands!

Those few moments of silence and inaction were trying ones to more than Luke Barnes. And he was not the only man who let loose a breath of relief when Green Gentry spoke, instead of striking.

"Wait a bit, Barnes," he said, speaking like a man who has placed a powerful restraint upon himself. "If the sheriff should come down on us to break up the still, what would you do?"

"Fight him the best I knowed how," was the stern response.

"And you are willing to repeat your solemn oath to live up to the very letter of the laws we shaped for our own protection?"

"I do."

"Then—but hold on just a minute, please," drawing a hand out of his bosom, empty. "I forgot for the moment. I've got other proof back here, and I'll bring it in so all can see just what is up."

With those hurried words in explanation, Green Gentry passed out of sight amid the shadows lying along the side of the cavern nearly opposite the narrow passage by which admittance was had from the ledge.

As though his departure removed a lock from their lips, the men left behind began talking among themselves, for the most part wondering how Gentry had learned this last bad news, but more than once flinging a thinly-veiled taunt or threat toward Luke Barnes.

He received these in gloomy silence, staring into the fire with dull, unseeing eyes, deeply pondering over the unfortunate situation into which he had permitted himself to drift.

For himself he cared comparatively little, though he had never thought to be branded as an actual criminal. He did not consider illicit distilling a crime.

But in case the worst should befall, and he be unable to prove his innocence of counterfeiting, what would become of his wife and child?

Already they had to fight for their cabin and

their rocky farm. Even now the mis-called law threatened to turn them out without a roof to shelter their heads!

"An' I say that ef a critter ain't *for us*, all over, he's mighty nigh as pizen as a open spy!" growled 'Gene Fuller, viciously glancing toward the brooding squatter. "An' ef anybody has sold us out, 'tain't 'mongst the hard an' willin' workers I'd go to look fer the traitor! No it jest ain't, now!"

"You button up that lip o' yours, 'Gene Fuller," growled Jasper Naughton, menacingly, "or mebbe you'll find it spread out all over the face o' ye!"

"An' what'll I be doin' all the time, Jas Naughton?"

"Nothin' wuss then you're tryin' to do now, anyway. Luke Barnes is true as steel, an' ef you wasn't a fool fer the lack o' sense, you'd know as much 'thout my tellin' of ye!"

"Let him show it, then, dug-gun him!"

"When the time comes, mebbe I will, gentlemen," coldly said Luke, stirred from his gloomy musings by that sharp interchange. "An' ef you do as well a'cordin', 'Gene Fuller, they won't nobody hint at your bein' a spy an' a traitor."

Before Fuller could make reply to this speech, there came a sudden sound that drew all eyes upward, to rest on a strange and thrilling spectacle.

Through an irregular opening in the roof of the cavern, came the head, arms and shoulders of a human being, wildly struggling to save himself from falling further!

CHAPTER XXI.

A DROP TOO MUCH FOR BARNEY.

It was not altogether that unlooked-for stubbornness on the part of Luke Barnes that caused the color to so suddenly fade from the face of Green Gentry, though no doubt the words Luke just then uttered had something to do with it.

That blunt allusion to the making of counterfeit money was a dangerous admission, in case unfriendly ears could possibly drink it in. And this was being done, at that very instant.

Fearing to lose one word of that highly important council, Barney Budge in part forgot his caution, and made a sound that attracted the attention of the counterfeiter chief. Gentry flashed a single glance upward, favored by a prior knowledge of that unlucky aperture through the roof of the cavern, and though he could not distinguish color or features, he saw enough in that one instant to tell him what imminent peril threatened them one and all.

His first and most natural impulse was to draw the pistol on the butt of which his hand instinctively dropped, trusting to kill or cripple the audacious eavesdropper by a lucky snapshot. His next was to shoot, supplementing the action by a warning yell to his fellows that would send them rushing out to make assurance doubly sure.

It is remarkable how actively one's brain will work in a great emergency.

While Luke Barnes was giving his ultimatum, all these schemes occurred to Green Gentry, only to be rejected as too dangerous to himself and his mates. If his aim should prove faulty, the spy would certainly escape through flight, before he could leave the cavern and strike his scent. And if slain outright, or crippled so as to render flight out of the question, what security had he that the head he had dimly outlined did not have company? And then, to the charge of making false money, would be added the accusation of murder!

Then it was that his mind grew decided, and waiting just long enough to drop a few sentences calculated to throw the spy off his guard, in case his suspicions should have been awakened, Gentry passed out of range of that hole in the roof, though taking a course almost directly opposite to the one he would naturally use if meaning to seek the outer air.

He was quickly swallowed up by the shadows, and then, for the first time since making that ugly discovery, he drew a fairly free breath. He glanced backward, to make sure that no one was following him, and saw that his mates clearly had no suspicion of the impending peril.

"So much the better for me!" he thought, with a treacherous gleam in his eyes. "If it's a gang up yonder—well, I'll have a better chance to slip through if they have the bunch to watch!"

Gentry moved into a contracting passage of some considerable length, using no light to guide himself with, but by keeping his right hand in contact with the rock wall, he avoided taking the wrong passage where the tunnel forked, thus turning gradually toward the outer air instead of burying himself deeper in the Hollow Hill.

It was a work that consumed considerable time, where the loss of a single minute might easily mean all the difference between safety and ruin or headlong flight; but swiftly as his wits had been forced to work, Gentry had carefully counted the odds, both for and against.

If he had turned directly for the outer air, by the passage through which, it was likely, the spy had watched them enter the rock-chamber, that cunning enemy would almost surely have taken alarm, and either sought safety in flight and hiding, if alone, or sounded the signal for closing in, if at the head of an armed force.

"If he don't betray himself to some of the men, as he did to my ears, I'll steal on him from behind, or one side. Then, if alone, he's my meat! If he's got a gang—if it's Hooper—I'll pull out for tall timber, and let the gang save their own hides!"

Green Gentry was not a hypocrite when alone. He kept his mask to wear while in company with the mates whom he was ever ready to sacrifice in order to guard his own worthless head.

Reaching the hole through which he was to leave the passage, Gentry paused to listen intently. Not a sound came to his ears, and he knew that no discovery had been made as yet. This lent him the requisite courage, and stealing through the bushes, he looked to his weapons, then crept along the ledge of dirt-strewn rock, which was the same shelf on which Barney Budge was playing eavesdropper.

Thoroughly familiar with the Hollow Hill, Gentry lost no more time in thought or reconnoitering, but stole silently as a shadow toward the hole in the cavern roof, only pausing long enough to make certain the spy had no armed force beside him.

So far as he could make out, the fellow was alone, and only his rear parts visible. Surely, if he had men to back him, they would be close at hand, if not out in clear sight. Curiosity alone would be sufficient to insure so much.

With his mind relieved on this point, Gentry cut little more time to waste, but creeping silently forward, keeping to the rear of the spy, whose entire faculties were turned in that one direction, he sprung forward and flung his whole weight upon the bent back of the fellow.

A muffled roar—a wild scramble—then Green Gentry closed both hands about a leg, just in time to prevent Barney Budge from falling entirely through the irregular opening. He quickly twisted the leg into one of the crevices, thus securing a purchase which enabled him to readily support that writhing, struggling weight, at the same time causing his luckless captive to swing to one side, leaving a portion of the hole free for his own use.

"Steady, down there, lads!" he cried, his face close to the rock, so as to make sure his voice would be recognized by the startled moonshiners. "Don't shoot unless you hear a bigger racket up here!"

Using one hand to press the leg into the crevice, drawing a revolver with the other, Gentry flashed a keen, anxious glance along the rock ledge in both directions. If the spy had any companions, they must surely show their hands at this stage of the game.

But his fears were groundless. Not a soul came in sight, and his flesh ceased to creep and crawl with the expectation of feeling steel or lead. The spy had been working on his own hook!

All was wild confusion below him, and knowing that any moment might bring a storm of bullets upward, when the startled counterfeiter recovered sufficiently to realize what the appearance of an outsider really meant, Green Gentry again sent a hasty warning down through the ragged aperture:

"It's all right, lads! There's only one, and I've got him foul!"

"Stiddy with him, boss, an' I'll let day-light—"

"Steady, *you!*" with sharp emphasis. "Try to keep the fellow from breaking his neck, men; I'm going to let him drop!"

Through all this Barney Budge had not uttered an articulate word, though he kept up his desperate struggles to free himself. Possibly he was too thoroughly frightened for speech, or, it may be, he still hoped to escape recognition by those he had been spying upon.

"Let him come!" cried one of those below, and releasing his grip on the leg, Gentry breathlessly watched the body shoot downward, head foremost. His fall was only partially broken by several arms, and then, as the moonshiners drew back, their chief could see Barney Budge lying on the rock floor, a quivering mass of repulsive humanity.

"Keep him safe until I get there!" called out Gentry, drawing his head back and sparing time enough to give the immediate vicinity a rapid, but thorough search.

Satisfied that the spy had been alone, Gentry made his way down to the other ledge, entering the cavern by the regular opening, now without a guard, since the entire band had congregated.

No one had touched the spy after he struck the floor, though more than one of those present had by this time recognized "the gentleman from Kentucky," who had cut something of a figure at the barbecue that forenoon.

Gentry also remembered the fellow, but he said nothing until a hasty examination assured him that the spy was merely stunned, and if not already recovering the senses temporarily lost through his ugly fall, he would shortly do so.

"Cover your faces, lads," he hastily muttered, in low tones, setting the example himself, by removing his hat long enough to pull the severed sleeve of a shirt—which made the most hideous sort of mask, by the way—over his face until twin holes came opposite his eyes.

These precautions had hardly been taken, when Barney Budge gave a grunting groan, shivered from top to toe, then rolled over, to swiftly shoot up into a sitting posture, as his bewildered eyes rested on one of those ghastly-looking heads.

"Good Lawd! ef I hain't died an' gone to—" The word stuck in his throat, but no one who witnessed that frightened face could long doubt just what letters would have fully expressed his ghostly fears.

He was surrounded by masked men, each one holding a ready weapon. These, to be sure, detracted somewhat from their otherwise ghostly aspect, but one thus introduced could not be expected to note minor points with anything like accuracy. And with each face hidden by the thin cloth, which fitted almost as closely as the skin beneath, revealing yet distorting each feature save the glittering eyes, and making each head dimly yet most repulsively resemble a skull, the vision was quite horrible enough to justify a thought of the infernal regions.

"Who set you on our track, Barney Budge?" harshly demanded Gentry, leveling a pistol at the head of the spy, finger on trigger.

"Good Lawd!" quavered the fellow, seemingly too utterly confounded to shrink from that ugly weapon. "An' all the time I tuck ye fer jest men—jest white men, like my own self! An' you—is this the sorter hell the preachers tell 'bout, boss?"

"You'll find it worse than hell, unless you talk out, straight and to the point, my fine fellow! Who put you on our track?"

"Why—jest nobody, sah, an'—Good Lawd!" shrinking, lifting a trembling hand between his face and that grim muzzle, as though he hoped to stop the bullet thus. "Don't shoot!"

"He knows too mighty much, boss," growled one of the masks.

"I don't know nothin'—I didn't see nur hear nur—cross the heart o' me, double times over, gentlemen, ef I did or will or—Good Lawd!" with a groan of utmost despair. "An' me jest think n' mebbe I could git a smell o' good whisky!"

Gentry made a sign which sent several of his men upon the spy, and while they held his limbs, their chief, putting up his pistol, carefully searched the shivering wretch for some positive proof of his real nature.

With poor success. A rusty but serviceable revolver, on the butt of which was rudely carved the initials of the name he had claimed. A small powder-flask, with a few bullets, a dirty bit of rag that had already supplied some patches for the bullets used in his pistol, a common jack knife, a pipe, tobacco, matches, together with a few dirty bits of currency; nothing more.

"Where have you hidden it, you cursed bloodhound?" savagely demanded Gentry, whipping out his pistol and thrusting its cold muzzle fairly against the face of the captive.

"Good Lawd!" sputtered Barney Budge, trying in vain to shrink away from that blood-chilling contact. "I didn't hide it. He burnt—I never—"

"Now I have got ye!" with a short, terrible laugh. "No use to boggle over it, critter! Who burnt it?"

Barney Budge gave a groan, mingled with a sigh of resigned despair.

"It jest slipped out when I didn't mean—now I hev done it!"

Gentry motioned his men to release the fellow, and to stand back. He permitted Barney Budge to sit up, but checked his further movement by a menacing flourish of his revolver, saying sharply:

"Spit it out, Barney Budge, and right at the mark. Nothing but a full and complete confession can save your life, man! What was it that was burnt? And who diu the burning? And when was it done?"

"Treasure map—Giner'l Bandy—'nour ago!"

CHAPTER XXII.

BARNEY BUDGE ON THE RACK.

THANKS to the shirt sleeve mask, nothing could be seen of the angry surprise written on Green Gentry's face just then, but his involuntary recoil plainly proved that he had anticipated an entirely different answer; but if the spy noticed this, he showed no sign as he spoke at more length without further urging:

"Deed he jest did, boss, an' you, gentlemen! An' I call it a durn shame to him, so I do! An' me trustin' him like a sleepin' baby! Jest rammed the map in the fire, an' let it all go up chimby—smoke an' ashes, gentlemen! An' that map wu't clean I cain't tell how many thousan' hard dollars—wuss luck my mammv's son!"

"Too mighty thin!" growled 'Gene Fuller, from behind the mask; but one considerably taller than he spoke up:

"Reckon he means what folks tell 'bout Uncle Jupe, cap'n."

"That's it," gloomily nodded Budge, the picture of dejection. "I fell heir to the map. I come all this way jest in hopes o' makin' a strike which 'd set me up on my eggs ag'in, bevin' bin e-tarnally bu'sted clean up in business by them pizen—Good Lawd!" clapping one hand over his mouth, but not in time to wholly smother

the question: Mebbe you b'long to the service?"

"What service?"

"Rev'nue—durn my onlucky tongue!"

There was a general stir at this, but Gentry quelled it with a single imperative wave of his hand. He gazed intently into the doleful face of his captive for fully a minute before speaking again.

"You're not nigh so big a fool as you try to make out, my fine fellow! I caught you spying upon us; what for?"

"You won't git hoppin' ef I tell ye, honest?"

"It's your talk; get under motion, Barney Budge."

"Waal, ef I must," with the air of one desperately nervously himself to confess the whole truth, "I'm from Kentucky. When I got back from the wah, I hedn't a dollar to cuss myself with, but—waal, I hed a few ole-time fri'nds left, an' they was runnin' a still. They tuck me in, an' in a little time—fer they was all likin' to play, ye see, cap'n—I sorter got away with the hull business, 'long o' knowin' the keerds better'n they did. Old sledge, ye see, gentlemen."

"Go on. What brought you spying on us tonight?"

"Waal, it didn't do me a mighty sight o' good, cap'n, my winnin'. Fer somebody sold me out. The rev'nue men come. Bu'sted up my outfit, an' give me three year in the pen. An' when my time was up, I was watched too mighty cluss fer to git started in the old line, 'round thar. So I tuck my hoofs in my han's an' lit out fer ole Missouri."

"What for? Simmer it down, Barney Budge!"

"I hed a map, showin' whar a mighty rich heap o' money an' sech-like was hid out by a nigger in the wab-times. It said on it to hunt on Brimstone Butte, an' Holler Hill. An' so—waal, I come hyar. An' no longer ago than this very durn mis'able night, that map was turned to smoke an' ashes an' sent up chimbly—durn his pesky hide!"

There was silence for a brief space, during which Barney Budge sat a picture of dejection, staring gloomily into the fire before him. And though Green Gentry had hardly the ghost of a doubt as to his being a revenue or secret service spy, he hardly knew just how to make that fact clear.

"Big Bandy burned your map, you say?" he ventured, at length.

"Deed he jest did, cap'n! Ef it'd bin him, dug-gun the critter!"

"To-night, you say? Then how came you this far away from his cabin?"

"Could I stay in the house o' sech a dug-gun cannyball?" indignantly ejaculated Barney Budge. "Could I pard in 'long of a critter what'd gone back onto a ole soldier like that? Not much! I jest tolle him to go to blazes, an' I'd go—durned ef I much keered *whar!* An' me lottin' on that pile o' money fer to keep my ole age in comfort!"

"How came you up yonder?" with a nod that indicated the hole in the roof of the cavern.

"Ef I knowed better myself, I'd tell ye jest how," sighed the victim of misfortune. "All I know is how mighty bad I wanted to git out o' the hole whar my hopes went glimmerin'—up chimbly, gentlemen! In jest smoke an' ashes! An' so—waal, I jest racked out, an, whar I mogged while in sech mis'ry, *I'll* never tell ye! But the fu'st I knowed, I hit a smoke. An' I foller'd it up, thinkin' mebbe it mought lead me to whar I could ketch whisky 'nough fer to make drunk come an' me fergit what I'd lost! An' so—I hit that hole, an' jest then the hull top o' the hill toppled over an' rammed me down this way, cap'n."

"How long were you watching us through that hole?"

"None so long but what I'd 'a' watched heap sight longer just fer a hope o' gittin' a smell o' good whisky, cap'n."

"And you have told us the truth, and nothing but the truth!"

"So help me, holy Moses!" spluttered Barney Budge. "Ef ye don't b'lieve me, jest send fer Giner'l Bandy. Spiseable as he done me dirt, I don't reckon he'd sw'ar to a lie jest to spite me furder—an' me a old soldier who fit an' fit until they wasn't nothin' more left to fight fer! Ef Giner'l Jo Shelby was hyar, he'd tell ye so, too!"

"You were one of Jo Shelby's men, then?"

"Bet I *was!* An' more'n proud to own it, too, be you gray or blue. One o' Shelby's Brigade, *I was*, cap'n!"

"I'm not disputing your word in that respect. Let it drop for the present, though I may refer to that point again, before the end. And since you have told us so very frankly just what and who *you* are, maybe you'll be so kind as to tell us *what we are?*"

"Gentleman o' the fu'st water, sah!" promptly cried Budge, adding with fierce belligerence: "Show me the critter as dast to hint the other way, an' I'll eat him up, body, boots an' britches, sah!"

"You overheard us talking about moonshining, of course, Budge?" persisted Gentry, with his eyes glittering in strong contrast to the

gentleness of his tones. "But you also heard us say something more?"

"Waal, I couldn't jest make out," slowly replied Barney, meeting that keen gaze without flinching. "Twas a mighty awk'ard posish. An' the smoke come up tol'able thick. An' I hain't nigh so sharp o' hearin' as I was afo' the wah."

"But you heard *something* about—about our engaging in other work than moonshining, for all that, Barney Budge. Come—it's only plain truth can save your life, my man! Out with it!"

"Then lyin' won't save me, plain truth goes, cap'n. I did hear some stray words, an' I don't mind sayin' I tried my level best fer to string 'em together so they'd make good sense. But I couldn't."

"You stick to this, Barney?"

"You said it was plain truth or lose my light, cap'n. Ef you'd ruther sight I'd lie, mebbe I kin hatch up one to fill the bill," with a sickly grin on his bruised face.

"He's lyin', by the mug o' him, cap'n!" growled Fuller, viciously. "He hearn too mighty much fer to be let go foot-free—an' so I jest tell ye down hard!"

"Stand up, Barney Budge!"

"Ef you ax it, cap'n," whined the spy, rising erect, his uneasy gaze at the same time noting how those armed men drew a close circle around him as though to guard against any desperate attempt to escape on his part. "Ef you'd jest send fer Giner'l Bandy, once, mebbe—"

"Pull off your clothes, Barney Budge!"

"But—Good Lawd!" spluttered the captive, dolefully. "An' me sufferin' wuss then death 'long o' the rheumaticks every winter!"

"Peel his hide, a couple of you fellows!" sharply ordered Gentry.

"Never mind—I'll strip—anythin' to keep peace into the fambly, gentlemen!" mumbled Budge, rapidly tearing off his rags.

One by one Gentry went over his garments, using his fingers and knife where his eyes were of no avail without such assistance. But if he hoped to discover aught in the garments to convict the suspected Secret Service agent, he was doomed to disappointment. Nothing of the sort was found, and doubtless Barney Budge felt thankful for the caution which had led him to hiding that warning rag under a stone, before creeping out of his covert.

With that found on his person or in his clothes, further defense would have been utterly useless. And matters were bad enough already, as he knew only too well.

Foiled in his search, Gentry tossed the garments back to Barney Budge, bidding him put them in place again. And while this was being done, not a word was spoken on either side.

"Now, Barney Budge," spoke up the chief, his voice hard and pitiless to the ear. "We'll get down to sober business."

"Ef I kin holp ye, cap'n, it only wants a word an' a know how," the prisoner meekly said

"You'll have a part to play, of course," with a short, ugly laugh. "But first—you fought with Jo Shelby, I think you said?"

"An' mighty proud I be to say it, cap'n!" with feeble enthusiasm.

"Well you may be, if true. A good man, a better soldier, a glory to his men, but a holy terror to his enemies—that was General Jo Shelby, Barney Budge. An angel in peace, a devil in war. Tender as a mother to all who served and trusted him. *But*—did you ever see how he punishe a spy who had tried to harm him, Barney Budge?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

BARNEY BUDGE ASKS A SHOW.

As he asked the question, Green Gentry leaned forward in his eagerness to note the full effect of his words, but this fell far short of his expectations. Barney Budge grinned broadly as he promptly said:

"Ef he wasn't in too big a hurry, tried 'em onto a drumhead 'fore hangin' 'em; but ef he was rushed fer time, jest sent 'em whoopin' over the line the shortest way come handy."

"And you never tried to save one of them from being punished?"

"Me? Good Lawd! A spy? In wah-times? Ketch me!" spluttered the man from Kentucky, the picture of supreme disgust.

"I have caught you, Barney Budge! Caught you in the very act! And in cracking up the wisdom of your old general, you have pronounced your own doom, you dirty spy!"

Barney Budge shrunk from before those viciously glittering orbs, but even yet he did not seem to fairly realize his full peril.

"Is he of'en tuck that way, gentlemen?" he huskily asked, trying to hold those blazing eyes with his own. "Good Lawd! hain't I suffered plenty 'nough 'long o' one crazy critter, 'thout tumblin' right slam-bang into the grip of a heap sight wuss'n'e?"

"Bah! you whelp!" flashed Gentry, throwing off his moderation, and speaking with savage distinctness. "Think you can still keep the blinders over our eyes?" Think you can make us believe you ever had aught to do with moonshining other than to ruin honest men's property and run poor devils into the jug?"

"Hope may die ef I wasn't—gi' me a chaintce ef ye don't reckon I know the ropes! I'll work a month fer ye on trial, an' never ax a red cent o' wages over'n above the drink I drink!"

"Your wages are already fixed, and waiting for what you've already done. Tell him, lads: what wages fits him best?"

"Jest one—croakin'!" promptly spoke up Gene Fuller.

"Wait—don't be so brash!" quickly interposed Luke Barnes, though he could be recognized only by his figure, for his face was hidden behind a shirt-sleeve mask, and his voice was altered by the bit of stone which he had slipped under his tongue. "Ef he's raally what he lays out to be, why not give him a chance?"

"That's all I ax, gentlemen," eagerly echoed Barney Budge. "Jest give a old soldier a show, an' ef I don't prove to ye I'm whiter'n ary fresh snow-drift ye ever trompled into, then I don't ax a red cent!"

"You lied to us when you said you didn't know how you found your way up yonder," grimly added Gentry, with an upward toss of his head.

"I did—sence you've hit it off right, cap'n, I'll 'fess it all up, straight as a string!" was the unexpected response.

"You own up that you were spying on us?"

"Naw!" with a shiver of mingled fear and disgust. "I didn't come o' no sech pizen stock as *that*, sah! What I mean is—I sort o' lied to ye when I reckoned I was looney over losin' that map o' the money the nigger hid out, wab-times. An' so—waal, the man I won that map of, at old sledge, told me people 'lowed Uncle Jupe done walked, o' moonlight nights. Jest spooked 'round whar he'd hid the money, don't ye see? An' so—waal, sence the map hed gone up chimbly—jest ashes an' smoke!—I didn't see no other show then to kinder lay fer his ghost, an' then hunt a'cordin'."

Gentry broke into a jeering laugh as the seeming tramp came to a pause, for lack of breath.

"Do you really expect us to believe such a wretched lie as that?"

"Ef the solid truth's a lie, then I'm lyin' to ye, sah," replied Barney Budge, drawing up his stocky figure with an air of injured dignity. "Ef the solid truth is truth, then I'm dealin' out gospel facts."

"You never had a map, or if you did, it was a guide to the living, not the dead, Barney Budge!"

"Then I was swindled by the— But I cain't think it, even on *your* say-so, cap'n," his sudden agitation subsiding into a dogged resolution.

"Ef you'll jest ax Giner'l Bandy, he'll tell ye how he barn't up my map. He'll tell ye how I done offered him a sheer in the find ef he'd jest help me study out them pesky lines onto that map. An' now—I'll do the same with you all! Help me find the treasure, an' call it my sheer o' the cost o' your stills. Take me in as a pardner, an' I'll agree to do double the work o' your level best man, sah!"

"I'm sadly afraid your breath'll not last long enough to complete the articles of partnership, Bruce McKay."

Once more Green Gentry tried a shot from ambush, and once more he failed to bring down the game he counted so certainly his own.

Instead of changing color or betraying himself by a start or shiver, Barney Budge innocently glanced around him as though looking for the owner of that name. All that was to be read in his bruised face was a little bewilderment; why should Bruce McKay's longevity be luggered into that question?

"You play it mighty well, Bruce," added Gentry, stepping forward and tapping the seeming bummer on a shoulder with his left hand, his other still gripping a pistol-but. "Of course you would, knowing that your very life is at stake. But—I know you for what *you are*, and I tell you flat—the *jig is up!*"

"But I ain't—Good Lawd!" spluttered the one thus addressed. "You ain't takin' me fer some other pusson, cap'n?"

"I'm taking you for just what you are: Bruce McKay, the keenest, siest, most dangerous bloodhound in the Secret Service!"

"Me? Me in—Durn your hide, critter!" with a low but intense rage breaking through his bewilderment. "Putt up your gun—let these gentlemen say they won't crowd in—then you say that over, an' I'll jest stomp the stuffin' clean out o' ye! Me—a durned pizen spy? Me a—Shed yer linen, critter, or I'll climb ye dressed!"

It actually looked as though Barney Budge would do as he threatened, too, but Jasper Naughton flung his arms around him from the rear, lifting him clear of the ground and holding him helpless.

"Simmer down, critter, an' I'll set ye free," he muttered, gruffly. "Tain't the likes o' you that kin talk fight in hyar—not any!"

"He dast to hint I was a cussed spy!" panted Budge, sulkily.

"Set him down, Jasper—"

"Stiddy!" sharply cried Naughton, his eyes shooting forth a warning. "No names, cap'n!"

"Set him down, I bid ye, man."

Naughton obeyed, then drew back a pace or

two, growling back of his mask in anything but a pleasant humor.

"Now for you, Bruce McKay. Bluff won't work here, and if you try anything weightier, the boys will drop you too cold for skinning."

"You've got a hell gang at the back o' ye, cap'n, but I say ag'in that ef you call me Bruce anybody, *you lie!*" boldly retorted Budge.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth, before half a dozen of the moonshiners piled upon him from all sides in answer to a barely perceptible signal from their leader. And though the doomed man did his level best to break away from the toils, he was thrown down and never given the ghost of a chance until his limbs were securely bound.

And then, when his captors drew back and he saw Green Gentry gazing savagely down upon him, the man's nerve seemed to fail him, for the first time. In hardly articulate gasps he began begging for mercy, only to be cut short by that pitiless voice.

"You've served long enough to know that in taking your office, you took your life in your hand as well, Bruce McKay!"

"But I ain't—I'm jest pore Barney Budge, boss!"

"You are Bruce McKay, and I have ample proof to back up every word I say. You are the keenest spy in the employ of the Secret Service. You were sent out here to break us up in business—"

"Cross my heart, cap'n!" quavered the bound man. "I've made moonshine my own self. Ef you don't b'lieve it, go or send to Kentucky an' look at the re-records. They'll show me savin' time fer moonshinin'!"

"Maybe so. Set a thief to catch a thief," with a hard laugh. "You may have passed as Barney Budge in Kentucky, for you've worn more different names than you carry fingers and toes. You may even have been arrested, tried and convicted of making illegal whisky—the better to enable you to trap more victims through the reputation thus won."

"But—durn it all, cap'n!" with a piteous whine and most woe-begone visage. "Give a pore critter jest the shadder of a show! You make a charge, an' then sw'ar it's done proved, never axin' guilty or not guilty! Is that white? Is that the way you'd like to ketch it?"

"What greater mercy would you show to any or all of us, after hearing what you did up yonder? You saw our faces. You marked our figures. You printed on your brain every word you heard us speak. You even counted over the devil's pay you thought was just as good as though you had it snug in your own pocket! And—Luke Barnes?"

"Fer the ssake o' Moses, cap'n, don't call names!" hoarsely cried Jasper Naughton, springing forward with hand uplifted in warning.

Green Gentry laughed bitterly.

"Why not, Jasper Naughton—back, hot-head!" his revolver flying up and causing the younger man to recoil. "What matter does it make now? He spotted as all, from up yonder, and—"

"Deed I never did," spluttered Budge, eagerly catching at the faintest ray of hope. "An' ef I did, would one ole moonshiner go back onto 'nother? Cross my heart—"

"With cold steel!" laughed Gentry, viciously, as he tossed off his hat and stripped the mask from his face. "Speak when you're spoken to, Bruce McKay. And as for you, Jasper Naughton," turning once more toward that individual, his tones growing harder and colder, "as for you, I'll overlook your bad break just now."

"Waal, I ain't beggin' no favors, cap'n," was the surly retort. "I say it again: you're a durn fool fer callin' out names like that!"

"I would be, if it was simply a question of moonshining, Naughton, but when we all know this infernal spy was listening to our other talk—"

"Button up, ef you be boss!" growled Barnes, angrily.

"You too, Luke?" laughed Gentry, sneeringly. "Why, man alive! do you know how long he was listening up yonder? I can't tell you, for sure, but I know he was watching and listening at the moment we spoke openly of making counterfeit money!"

An instant silence fell over all present. Each pair of eyes turned toward the face of the bound man, and great though his control over his nerves, Barney Budge could not keep his color from slowly fading away.

Knowing this, he tried to cover it up by whining:

"Hope may die ef I ever did, gentlemen! An' ef I hed—sence you jest now let it out—I'd be only too glad to j'yne in an' help git even 'ith the pesky Gov ment that broke me all up in business. Waal, now, I jest would! Jest jump at the fu'st chaintce, I would!"

"Did I bid you speak, Bruce McKay?" icily demanded Gentry, covering the doomed man with his revolver.

"Shoot, critter, ef you want to wipe out a bird o' the same feather!" recklessly cried the captive, with a desperate effort lifting himself to a sitting posture, gazing unflinchingly into that grim muzzle.

"You still hope to bamboozle us?"

"I've done let go all grip on hopes. I've made up my mind that a man o' my growin' hain't got no use o' hopin'. But, ef ye butcher me the next minute, cap'n, I'll stick it oat that I ain't no durn spy. I'm jest Barney Budge, an' ef you'll give me a show I'll prove it to ye all! An' then—hawks don't eat hawks when they's sweater meat layin' round in heaps an' gobs. An' I'm one o' ye, ef you'll jest take the trouble fer to 'vestigate a weenty bit!"

"What do you mean by that, Bruce McKay?"

"Bruce McKay be durned! But let it go: ontel I've showed ye how fur you've done wronged me, cap'n," his tones growing more placable as he added: "You looked fer proof, but you didn't find it. Come closter up, an' I'll tell ye whar my proof lays!"

Almost involuntarily Gentry complied, and—just how the marvelous feat was performed, no man could explain—the spy burst his bonds, and, butting Gentry in the pit of the stomach as he leaped up, knocked him endlong, then darted straight for the narrow passage, for liberty!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEATH LOTTERY.

GREEN GENTRY was unable to help himself, and nearly all of the rest were taken so completely by surprise that the spy would surely have disappeared through the narrow passage leading to the hillside, only for the swift action of Jasper Naughton.

He caught up a hatchet lying at his feet, and hurled it after that fleeing figure. And without even a groan, the doomed man fell, as the whirling missile struck him squarely on the back of the head.

"Grab—don't let—" gasped Gentry, then rolled over on his face, vomiting copiously from the shock received from that bullet-head.

The words were not fairly past his lips before a dozen eager hands were fastened upon the spy, but he made no resistance. If not dead—no! he was only insensible!

The poll, or the handle of the hatchet had struck him, not the keen blade; but the shock had been enough. And long before Green Gentry had recovered sufficiently to give an order, or even take an interest in the matter, the spy was bound in a round dozen of places. And as though resolved to make assurance doubly sure, Jasper Naughton knelt by his side, holding the sharp point of a kni'e close over his heart.

"The critter ain't dead yit!" he muttered, with a curious mingling of relief and disappointment in face and voice as he made that announcement. "Better fer us—better fer him—if he was! But sence it's come that way, look to the cap'n, you critters. Fetch him out o' his sickness, for it's his say-so, now. An' the sooner we git the job over, the easier I'll know how to breathe ag'in'!"

By this time Gentry was recovering, having emptied his terribly-shocked stomach. And after a liberal drink of whisky, he was able to stagger to his feet. Only his husky voice and unusually pale face remained to tell of what he had suffered during those few minutes.

"Now are you satisfied, gentlemen?" he asked, an ugly sneer making his mustache writhe for an instant. "Would a harmless fool like he played, be able to do a trick like that?"

"Ef it was death fer him, webbe he mought," slowly ventured Luke Barnes.

"Look ye, my man," slowly said Gentry, his eyes blazing, his voice low and deadly. "Walk the chalk-line, or mind your own head! Somebody sold us out, and—"

"You don't dast to even hint I was that man?"

"Not unless you force us to believe as much. But some one did, and that some one must pay the penalty! I'll hunt him down if it takes a lifetime!"

"Count us all in, cap'n!" came from half a dozen voices.

"But first, we've got to get shut of Bruce McKay," said Gentry, in more natural tones. "He is a spy. He has found out our secrets. He knows us not only as moonshiners, but as makers of counterfeit money. You know all this, gentlemen. And so—what is to be done about it?"

"Thar's only one thing that kin be done, as I see," bluntly spoke up Gene Fuller. "That is—bey the laws made a'cordin'!"

"Are you willing to take your chance of being the elected one?"

"I jest am, cap'n!" was the bold response.

"And you Jasper Naughton?"

"You'd ought to know 'thout axin', boss. I be."

And so, taking each man in turn, Green Gentry put that question, to receive the same answer in effect, until he came to Luke Barnes, whom he had left to the last, purposely, as all believed.

"All have voted save you, Barnes. Now—are you true to your sacred cath as the others?"

"I tuck an oath, but ef you'll think back, cap'n, 'twasn't jest the same all the others tuck," slowly uttered the squatter, his uncovered face showing troubled in the lurid light. "From the very fu'st I said I wouldn't mix up in the money business. Didn't I?"

"You belonged to the gang. You took the

same oath. You are as deeply implicated as any of us. If that devil goes free, he would have just as hard a case against you. So—will you take your chance in the lottery, or are we to think you a traitor?"

Luke Barnes turned pale as a corpse at those slow, pitiless words. He told nothing but the truth when he claimed to be guiltless of engaging in or profiting by the false coining. He cursed himself for his weakness in not drawing out of the gang the hour he learned what was their real object, using illicit distilling merely as a convenient mask.

But as he looked around and met those sullen, suspicious, menacing eyes, he thought of his wife and daughter: thought how utterly defenseless they would be left in case aught should happen to him! And he knew, plainly as though each and every man present had loudly proclaimed the fact, that in case he refused to do his share in that awful job, they would kill him to insure their own safety.

"Take your chance with all of us, Luke Barnes, or—you know the penalty prescribed for traitors by our laws!" sternly said Gentry.

"Ef it wasn't fer the wimmen back home, I'd bid ye do your level wu'st!" he sullenly muttered. "Fer tha'r sake—I'll take my chaintce 'long o' the rest."

Green Gentry laughed: coldly, bitterly, without even the ghost of aught akin to mirth in the notes. But he had won his point, and reluctantly as Luke Barnes had yielded, he knew him well enough to feel fully assured the squatter, let the lottery go as it might, would never betray aught of that awful secret.

"You do well, Luke Barnes," he said, gripping that reluctant hand in his own and shaking it with some show of warmth. "It's an ugly bit of business, take it all 'round, but—"

"Ain't thar any way to git out o' it short o' killin'?"

"Can you point out such a way, Luke Barnes?"

The squatter was silent. He could not find another and more agreeable solution, yet he tried hard to do so. Gentry saw this, and added:

"What is the life of a dirty spy when weighed against that of all of us, man?"

"Ef you'd only give' up the dirty work when I spoke out!"

"But we didn't give it up. Nor did you draw out, as you might have done at the start, Luke," sneered Gentry. "And so—think of it, man! Think what will come to your family if that devil goes free with the story of all he heard through spying this night! Think of all the other innocent ones who must suffer, if he escapes! And then—isn't it better for one head to bear it all? And that head belonging to a bloodhound who makes his living by hanging or putting in jail poor, helpless men, and even women? Isn't it, Luke Barnes?"

"Durn so much chin-music, cap'n!" growled Gene Fuller. "Git up the things fer votin' with, an' le's finish the job!"

"Sence it hes to be done—hurry it over, cap'n," moodily muttered Barnes, turning away toward the rear of the cavern.

Gentry passed over to where the doomed spy lay helpless, Jasper Naughton still keeping close guard over him.

"No, he's livin'," muttered the young man, shaking his head to negative that inquiring glance. "Twould 'a' saved trouble ef the hatchet hed tuck him as I meant. But I hedn't time fer to measure the distance, an' so—waal, I didn't finish him off."

He gave a faint sigh of relief at this, for, after all, killing a fellow-being is no slight thing, out of the heat of a general battle.

As Gentry bent lower to examine the face of the spy, his eyes flew open and a faint, husky sound escaped his lips. If intended for speech, it could not be interpreted.

"Pull this over his head, Jasper," curtly said Gentry, drawing back and dropping a flannel shirt-sleeve into the hand of his henchman. "Double it, so he can't see, but leave him breathing room. I'll fix up the tickets for the drawing."

Passing back to the fire, he dropped upon his knees, producing a small notebook, out of which he tore a number of leaves equal to the members present, including himself, speaking as he did so:

"All of you heard, at the time, just what the words 'death lottery' meant, but as this is the first time we ever had occasion to make use of the scheme, maybe I'd better explain before going further. What do you say, gentlemen?"

"It cain't do no harm, though I, fer one, hain't fergot a single p'int in the trick," chuckled Gene Fuller.

That sanguinary rascal seemed actually delighted with the idea of taking part in a ceremony so horrible!

"Ef it wasn't fer knockin' the sport all eendways, I'd offer to do the work my lonesome self!" he boastingly declared, a moment later.

Gentry frowned blackly as he shook his head.

"None of that, Fuller! The death lottery must be kept a profound secret, and unless you solemnly swear—"

"Oh, I'll never tell nur ax a question, cap'n. I jest wanted to show how ready I be to do my sheer, ef the lucky ticket comes to me."

Gentry seemed satisfied with the answer, and with his penknife carefully trimmed the leaves down to the same size. Then on one of the lot he made a pencil mark, after which he rose up, saying:

"Now for just what the words *death lottery* means, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ATROCIOUS SCHEME.

"YOU understand without saying, gentlemen, that the main idea of this sort of drawing is, after the punishment of the spy, to shroud the whole affair in as complete mystery as possible. I had that central idea in mind when I devised the scheme, and as its originator, I'm the proper one to make each point clear before the actual drawing of lots shall begin."

"I have here one slip of paper for each member of the inner circle, including Luke Barnes," with a grim smile as he nodded toward that personage.

"Don't try to rub it in, cap'n," coldly spoke up Jasper Naughton. "Luke he's passed his word, an' that means he'll stick true when mebbe them as calls tha'rsevles heap sight better has tucked tail an' scooted fer tall timber—you bet he will, now!"

"And don't you try to pick up a slur where none has been flung out, Jap Naughton. Luke insisted on being counted outside of the inner circle, and I'm so pleased with his actions since that I thought to do him honor, by putting his name in brackets, so to speak."

"Never mind the honor, but git on with the ugly work," gloomily interposed the squatter himself.

Although he had only a vague, shadowy remembrance of what the terms of the death lottery were, he felt that he was doomed to be the agent chosen by fate to carry out its terrible mandates.

"As I started out to say," resumed Gentry, holding up the bits of paper where all could see them. "I have a ticket here for each man of us. On one ticket I have marked a round ring, in pencil, leaving all the others blank. Take a square look at them, gentlemen, and convince yourselves that I am giving you a fair deal."

More through curiosity than from any thought of trickery, the men complied, gazing at the square tickets as Green Gentry held them up.

"Are you satisfied so far, gentlemen?"

There was a unanimous assent, and the master of ceremonies added:

"Then the next move is to finish preparing the ballots, which I do by, first of all, folding up the ticket containing the pencil-mark. That, as you may remember, tells the man who draws it, *he is the lucky man!*"

Where all could watch his movements, Gentry folded the square of paper several times, until the fatal ring could not possibly be detected by either sight or sense of touch. He dropped the ballot into his hat as it lay on the floor, then folded the other tickets after precisely the same fashion, each one by itself.

When all had been dropped into the hat, he picked it up, closing the sides and explaining further:

"Each man will draw a single ballot, without looking into the hat. He will keep the ballot secret, even from himself, until after each man has carried out the rules governing this death lottery. And each man will join with me in solemnly swearing that, if *he* draws a blank, he will never try to learn *who* drew the marked ballot; if he be elected to sacrifice one life in order that scores may live in peace and security, he will sacredly vow to forever keep his own secret, even from the wife of his bosom, or, should he prove to be unmarried, from the girl he loves best. And in case any one of this company should fall into trouble because of the events of this night, so unwillingly forced upon us by one who sought to ruin and destroy, the other brothers vow and declare that they will, one and every, dare all to save their heroic comrade."

"Brothers, do you take the oath?"

"We do!" came the unanimous response, rumbling through that part of the Hollow Hill, and sending a cold chill crawling over the doomed spy, blinded, bound, helplessly lying there on the rock flooring, awaiting his death!

Whether intentionally or not, Green Gentry was watching the pale face of Luke Barnes as he put the question, but if he feared a failure in that quarter, he quickly realized his mistake. The gaunt squatter plainly joined in with his brethren. From birth a rude fatalist, he had accepted what he deemed his fate, and would follow it to the bitter end without flinching further.

"Our mutual oath is recorded, brothers, and it is good!"

"Who's to take fu'st whack at it?" asked Fuller, seemingly anxious to test his good or ill fortune.

"Don't be in such a sweat, 'Gene,'" laughed Gentry, motioning the hot-head back with his free hand. "There are other points to make perfectly clear before the drawing takes place."

"You all agree with me that we can live only through the death of this spy, brothers?"

Once more he received a general assent.

"Good! But if he can be disposed of without casting even the shadow of suspicion in our direction, better! And if matters can be put in trim to show that he owes his death to himself, wouldn't that be best of all?"

"But kin it be so fixed up?" dubiously ventured Naughton.

"If my idea is carefully carried out, it surely can," was the confident response. "And before the balloting begins, I'll tell you just what I mean, and let all hands take a vote on its acceptance."

"You haven't forgotten the part Bruce McKay—or Barney Budge, as he called himself—played at the barbecue: that of a whisky-sucking tramp. You remember that he claimed to have left the grounds in company with Big Bandy, going home with the brigadier. All of which combined to give me my idea. And if he really had the row with Bandy, as he claims, so much the better!

"When the drawing has taken place, each man keeping his ticket unopened and unknown even to himself until at the place I'll indicate in a moment, we will leave here, one by one, at brief intervals, going direct to the spot where we left our animals. When there, each man will open his ballot and look at its face. If blank, he will at once ride for home by the shortest cut. If the marked square, he will also ride away, but instead of going home, he will wait half an hour, as nearly as he can guess, then leave his nag hidden and come back here. If he fears all may not yet be gone, let him hide outside, and give the regular signal. If any one be here, that one will answer, then take his departure by the other passage, firing a single shot when he steps outside, to assure the elected that he is playing square with him."

"Ain't all this sorter kinder pilin' up the agony, cap'n?" asked Fuller, dubiously rubbing his chin. "Cain't we git thar by a shorter cut, reckon?"

"If we were butchering a hog, yes. But this is a mighty serious affair, my good fellow, even though you make light of it. And if, by taking many precautions, the elected one can perform his work without even his best friends suspecting just whose hand dealt the blow, I think the time and trouble mighty well invested."

"Let 'er flicker, boss. I was jest thinkin' o' the p'izen critter yender; he must be gittin' mighty tired waitin' fer his nightcap!" chuckled the heartless wretch.

"Tie a knot in that tongue, 'Gene Fuller, or the slack of it'll get your neck into trouble," growled Gentry, then taking up his explanation once more:

"When satisfied that the coast is clear, the elected brother will come here. He will set the feet of the spy at liberty, but keep his hands and arms bound. He will take the rope hanging yonder, and fasten one end of it around the spy's body, then take him away from the cave.

"Using his own judgment how best to accomplish it, he will take the spy to the creek, bringing up at the flat rock overhanging the deep hole a ways below the regular ford. Once there, the rest is simple enough; just push the rascal into the drink, holding fast to the rope, and let him drown!"

There was a sharp catching of the breath by more than one of the stern men listening to that revolting conclusion. This seemed more than ever like murder!

Killing was bad enough in itself, but this—

"It must be done, brothers!" sternly cried Gentry, his assumed composure breaking up as he read that sound, those looks, aright. "Would you leave plain proof that murder had been done? Would you say, by bullet or steel, that this man has been killed by—whom? By the very men whom Bruce McKay, the spy of the Secret Service, came to these parts to hunt down and arrest, of course!"

"But—durned ef I kin seethrough it!" frowned Naughton, shaking his head.

"Wait until I finish explaining, and maybe you'll have your eyes sharpened a bit, gentlemen," laughed Gentry, seeming to take all this as an indirect but huge compliment to his diabolic ingenuity. "I've figured the whole thing out, and it can't help but work to perfection."

"The elected brother will wait until certain the rascal is dead, then he will haul in his fish. He will remove the bonds, untie the rope, and let the body sink again. He will take the rope and cords away with him to a safe spot, and there bury or burn them, after which he can take the shortest way home. See the point?"

"But 'pears to me you look over one p'int, cap'n," said Barnes, gravely. "S'pose he has pardners nigh to hand? S'pose they know jest whar he 'lowed to go this night? S'pose his body is found—as it shortly will be, in the eend —what'll those pardners say an' do?"

"What can they either say or do? There will be no signs of violence about his person—"

"He tumbled down yen' hole. An' he was knocked cold with a hatchet. Mebbe you forget them p'ints, cap'n."

"All of which can be readily laid to his rolling over among the rocks as the rapids carried him to the pool. Everybody at the barbecue will swear that the fellow swilled whisky like a hog. They know, and will remember that he

was drunk—or playing drunk which will serve us just as well, bear in mind, my jolly fault-finder!—when he left the grounds. And this being so, what more natural than that he should stumble at the ford, and fall into the water?"

Luke Barnes said nothing, though his gaunt visage showed that he was not yet entirely convinced, and Gentry impatiently added:

"Even if ugly questions be asked by his friends, would they come with less force if the devil was put out of the way by bullet or steel? And if we were to bury his body, wouldn't his very disappearance be accepted as proof of killing? I tell you, brothers, this is the safest and surest method of disposing of the fellow. And, I think you will all agree with me so far; *disposed of he must be!* It's *his* life or *our* imprisonment! And you know what that means!"

"The way is plenty good. I'm ready fer the drawin'!"

Others backed Fuller up in this cry, and lifting the hat above his head, Gentry bade the men fall into line, drawing their chance in turn.

Fuller was the first, and as he held his ticket close gripped in his hand, Gentry spoke again:

"Pull out for your nag, Fuller, and only stop there long enough to open and scan your ballot. If clean, ride straight home. If it bears the ring, get out of the way of the rest, and wait five minutes for each brother you leave behind you. Go!"

Without a word, but with a vicious grin at the doomed spy, Fuller left the cavern.

And so, marking the passage of time by his watch, at the end of each and every five minutes, Gentry had one of his men draw a ticket and take his departure.

Each man was plainly called by name when his turn came, but no one openly objected to that, though all knew the spy was intensely on the alert, blinded and muffled though he might be. What matter? He was certainly doomed to death, and could never make use of the information he might thus gather.

Luke Barnes was called near the middle, and like the others he quietly drew his lot, and as silently stole away from the cavern.

Naughton was next to the last, and he, too, departed without a word being exchanged with his chief. And then, taking the last ticket from his hat, Green Gentry put it safely in his pocket, noted the exact time, took the rope from the wall and noosed it about the body of the spy.

Then he sat down, gazing at the face of his watch.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BOUND BY HIS OATH.

ALTHOUGH Luke Barnes had no means of knowing whether he had drawn a blank or the marked ticket in that dread lottery when he left the cavern, he entertained not the slightest doubt. He seemed to know that fate had elected him to perform a hideous crime.

Yet in nothing save his unusually pale face did he betray this ugly belief. He walked as swiftly, trod as surely over those loose stones, as on any other occasion. And not even his closest friend, had they come face to face in that minute, would have suspected aught had gone wrong with him.

Outwardly he was calm, but below that cold, grave exterior, a hell of stormy passions raged.

Why had he not drawn out of that evil company the moment he knew for certain that their moonshining was really but a mask to a far more heinous business? He had threatened to do so. But—he had been persuaded to remain. He need not engage in the counterfeiting. He need not touch or profit by a single dollar thus made.

And so—he had played with fate, and this was the beginning of the end!

He kept the little bunch of paper tightly clinched in his left hand, never even taking a glance at it until he had reached the spot where, in company with others, his horse stood hitched. Even then he did not pause to examine the ticket, but unhitched his horse, and climbed into the saddle, riding rapidly away from the spot, heading toward home.

Only for a few hundred yards. Then he turned aside, making his way through the timber until a point which he had chosen in his mind for that purpose, even before drawing his ticket from Green Gentry's hat. He did not mean to prove false to his oath, then!

Nothing was further from his thoughts. If he had been alone in the world he would never have let matters go so far. Rather than have a hand in that foul assassination, he would have dared the bullets or steel of his confederates.

But he was not alone. He had his family to think of. Already they were threatened with the loss of their farm, their home, all for which he had labored so hard, pinched so closely, suffered so much. Only his stubborn courage kept a roof over their heads this long. And if he was to die, what would become of those two weak, helpless women?

"It's all fer them two," he muttered, as, having fastened his horse once more, he turned to the nearest bit of moonlight, there to unfold his ticket and make sure his fatalism had not deceived him.

It had not! On the open paper there plainly

showed the fatal ring which doomed him to ruthlessly sacrifice the life of another. Yet his hard-set features never changed in the slightest degree. He had long since discounted the horrible truth, and he was long past the point of being freshly shocked.

He tore the ticket into bits, then put them into his mouth, chewing them up, slowly, deliberately, before swallowing them. He had ample time. He had left four men behind him, without counting Green Gentry.

"A clean half-hour, not countin' what time I've spent a'ready," he muttered, looking around for a moment, then sitting down on a bit of a decayed tree. "Wish it mought be less, but law is law, an' I'm bound to foller it clean out to the eend."

With elbows on knees, and chin propped by his joined hands, Luke Barnes sat and waited for the minutes to drag their slow length along.

He had enough food for thought, such as it was, and he let his brain run riot during that trying interval of inaction.

No need to reproduce his musings. They had little range; for the most part confined to his family, his own blind folly, and the hideous extremity to which his mad temporizing had brought him.

Not once did he think of trying to evade that dreaded deed which stared him in the face. He had sworn to carry out the laws formed for their own safety. He had sworn to do his part in punishing any or all spies and traitors. And though he had, at the time, meant only such as menaced their stills, he knew now that he had bound himself to guard and protect that other black, evil business.

Busy as was his brain, Luke Barnes kept close account of the minutes. He had never owned a watch, and had never a clock in his house. Because of that, he was all the better able to measure time by the moon and stars. And when he rose from his seat, giving his head a toss, his gaunt frame a vigorous shake, he knew that he could not be more than a single minute ahead or behind the time set.

"That'll 'low the boys sech time as it'll take me to git back to the hole," he muttered, starting away through the woods, choosing the most direct course, heedless of the creek which he would have to wade.

Not a sound greeted him as he paused below that ledge. He felt confident that all had departed, save the spy, but he doggedly followed the instructions given them all by their chief. He bent a finger and placed it between his lips. He sent out a tremulous whistle, then bent his head in listening.

No response. Then, knowing that the last conspirator had indeed taking his leave, Luke Barnes picked his way up the steep, reaching the ledge and slipping under the leafy screen which concealed the entrance of the cave from aught but a close inspection.

The lantern was still burning, and by its beams he saw the figure of the doomed spy lying on the floor, much as it had been when he took his departure. He gazed around, but no other shape was visible. He had been left alone to carry out that dread decree.

"Who is it?" suddenly asked the spy, painfully lifting his head, though that doubled mask shut out all sight and deadened all sounds.

"What was once a man," gravely responded Barnes, picking up the lantern and holding it so the light fell fairly upon the captive, showing him the rope already noosed about his body. "What is now jest a dumb, onhearin' tool to shet off the life of a heap sight better bein'."

He extinguished the light, and cast the lantern aside. He required no such aid, just then. The dying embers were sufficient for what remained to be done.

"You—you are alone with me, friend?" quavered the spy, whose nerve had been terribly shaken by all he had endured during those horrible minutes.

"Jest now, but the rest is close outside, waitin' to make sure I don't go back onto my word," slowly replied Barnes, lying that he might escape the piteous pleading for mercy which he knew was sure to come to him, else.

"Don't let them murder—"

"They'd butcher me, ef I was to say even a word fer ye, critter," in the same dull, passionless tone. "Come—we must be marchin'!"

He lifted the spy to his feet, after cutting the rope that held his lower limbs helpless. He steadied the man until he could use his legs, closing his ears firmly to those broken, heart-rending prayers for mercy. He could not listen, since he could not grant!

"What is writ' hes to come to pass, critter," was his only remark, as he guided his victim through the passage and out upon the ledge.

Here he paused, musing for a little, to finally say:

"Will you hold your hush, or shell I gag ye? All your yellin' wouldn't fetch no help, but it mought make my mates treat ye heap sight rougher then I'd like to look on an' see."

"You merciless devil!" panted the doomed man, fierce anger lending him much of his old-time strength of body and mind. "Do your worst! I've begged my last. Now—I'll haunt you to your dying hour!"

"Ef it's to come that way, nothin' I kin do'll holp make it go any dif'rent," coldly said Barnes, guiding his captive down the slope to the comparatively level space below.

Barney Budge—to give him the title he had elected for himself—proved as good as his word, and silently obeyed each impulse lent him by his executioner, though he must have known what hideous fate awaited him at the termination of that blind journey.

It may be that, convinced his fate was irretrievably sealed, he had resigned himself to the inevitable. Or, more likely, he was waiting to more fully recover the use of his legs before making at least one desperate effort to escape. But be that as it may, Luke Barnes had no particular difficulty in guiding the spy to the precise spot set for his execution.

This was not many rods from the regular ford, below which the creek roared and tossed and foamed over and around scattered rocks, forming a really dangerous rapid, ending in a wide, long, deep pool of eddying water, over one edge of which hung a broad, flat rock, rising a yard or more above the surface of the water.

To this rock Luke Barnes escorted his captive, gripping him firmly by the collar while speaking gravely:

"I'll give ye five minutes in which to make your peace with heaven, stranger. At the end o' that time, you must go!"

Had the near approach of death paralyzed that brain? Barney Budge never spoke. He made no effort to break away. He stood silent and motionless until the time expired, when Luke Barnes spoke grimly:

"Say your prayers, critter, fer your time is up! I hate mighty to do it, but—you know too mighty much to live any longer!"

CHAPTER XXVII. PAYING THE PENALTY.

"HOLD! for God's sake, man!"

Hardly conscious of what he was saying or doing—only feeling that, at all hazards, he must save this man from staining his soul with an atrocious crime—Gilbert Cochrane burst the spell which had fallen upon him as he heard those grimly terrible words, and sprung forward, landing upon the flat rock even as Luke Barnes whirled about to confront him.

The full rays of the moon fell upon that spot, and though he had been so greatly startled by that sight and those pitiless words, Gilbert Cochrane had been able to distinguish something of the manner in which the doomed man was bound. And though he could hardly believe Luke Barnes was in sober earnest—that he actually intended to kill the prisoner—instinct led him to whip out his knife even as he sprung forward to the rescue.

Luke Barnes was taken completely by surprise, and so changed was that voice by intense horror and strong amazement, that he even fancied it came from the lips of Green Gentry!

"Then 'twas all a trick, an' you don't—*Gil Cochrane!*"

"For the love of Heaven, Luke—"

"Back! cuss ye!" snarled the squatter, face and voice convulsed with fury as he recognized the man he hated so intensely. "Back, or I'll kill ye, too!"

He made a savage stroke at the young man as he landed on the rock in the clear moonshine, but Cochrane swiftly ducked and saved himself from the full force of the blow, at the same time using his knife in a sweeping slash across the ropes which encircled the body of the stranger for whose life he was risking his own.

He could do no more than that; in so doing, even, he was throwing away his own chance for life, as it seemed. For Luke Barnes, fairly beside himself with fury, followed up that fierce assault, clutching the young man by the throat with one hand, raining heavy blows upon him with the other, forcing him to the rock, on which that knife dropped with a ringing clatter.

Left unsupported, Barney Budge also fell, tripped by the fiercely struggling men, and—by accident or design, helped them roll over in their grapple, by a vigorous kick.

For one instant they hung on the verge of the rock, then toppled over and sunk with a loud splash below the surface of the deep pool!

Up to that moment Gilbert Cochrane had sought only to free his throat from that vise-like grip, and to evade the blows which the maddened squatter was raining on his head and shoulders in his blind fury. He had not struck once in anger. Even while he realized that this man was about to commit a deadly crime, he could not forget that he was also the father of the woman so dear to his heart.

As for Luke Barnes, he for the moment forgot the hideous duty which had led to his being at the deep pool. He forgot everything save that he was in the presence of the being whom he held his bitterest enemy in the wide world. The man to whom he owed his present awful position. For, had he not been cheated out of his own, he would never have sought moonshining as the only open means of gaining the ready money necessary to pay the lawyer for fighting for his home.

It had all come from the loss of his title deeds,

and to Gilbert Cochrane he owed a debt of hatred which a score such lives could not have repaid. And so—remembering this, remembering too that his enemy had caught him in the very act of taking another life—he fought for his own revenge, and for the safety of his loved ones.

Locked in that death-grapple, they rolled from the rock and fell into the cold water. The shock was severe. The cold took even his breath for the instant. And before he could fairly recover, Luke felt a pair of hands tearing desperately at his own throat.

How long that terrible struggle lasted, he never knew. It seemed for a lifetime. And all went on beneath the surface!

A frightful roaring filled his ears. His brain seemed bursting through the bones. His lungs seemed filled with liquid fire. Those iron fingers were tearing his throat to shreds. Then—some savage water monster seemed to grapple with them both, rolling them over and over on the sharp rocks, pounding and hammering, tearing and biting, twisting them limb from limb in its horrible might.

He must have lost consciousness for a time, since his next remembrance came as he lay half out of the water, under a clump of bank bushes, at one side of the pool.

He stared stupidly about him for a space, unable to recognize his whereabouts or to recall what had reduced him to such strange weakness.

All was still about him. The moonlight shimmered on the slowly circling eddy. The cool water came to his waist, slowly numbing his lower limbs. What did it all mean? What had happened? How—

Then it all flashed upon him, and with a hoarse, gasping cry he lifted his head and glared savagely about him.

"*Gil Cochrane!*"

The name of his hated enemy broke involuntarily from his lips, and catching sight of a dark shape nearly opposite, he plunged into the pool and swam across, the lust of vengeance still hot within him.

The shape resolved itself into a half-decayed log. Then—

Was Gilbert Cochrane lying at the bottom of the pool—dead? Had he killed him? Was he well rid of the only man who could bear witness to his crime?

He caught his breath sharply at that thought, for—had he indeed performed his part in that hideous death lottery?

He looked across the pool toward the flat rock, but it was bare. No human being stood or lay upon it. Yet—how could Barney Budge have escaped, bound as he had been?

"He held a knife—I see it glimmer—an' he didn't cut me with it, as I reckoned he 'lowed. So—"

The terrible truth flashed upon him in that instant! Gilbert Cochrane had escaped his vengeance, and had set the doomed spy at liberty!

And yet—surely his death-grip had not failed him so utterly?

Hardly conscious of what he did, Luke Barnes slipped back into the water and swam across to the flat rock, shivering like a leaf and fancying that with each stroke the ghastly hand of a dead man was reaching up to grasp and drag him down to share its master's doom.

He caught the rock and fairly jerked himself out of the water and on top of the platform. He cast one shuddering glance behind him, then glared around in quest of the spy.

He was not to be seen. But—he held up a piece of rope on which his hand rested as he arose. And he knew that it had formed part of the bonds about the spy's body when led to the rock!

"Gone—got away!" he huskily panted, forgetting for the moment all else in the awful discovery; for awful it surely must prove, after all the spy had heard and seen that night!

What could he do? How could he remedy his mistake? How? How?

He clasped his dully throbbing head with both hands, desperately striving to clear his wits and hit on some method of averting the danger which threatened them all. And—his loved ones, with the rest!

He sprung forward at that thought, madly searching for the spy amid those dense shadows. He must find him! If he only had help! If his comrades were only there to unite in the search, they would surely recapture that merciless bloodhound! They would—

Would they put any trust in his account of that escape? Would they not recall his hard fight against killing that demon? And so remembering, would they not—

"They'd say I done set him loose!"

He started at the sound of his own voice as those words passed his lips. It was the voice of a stranger, and he mechanically felt for a weapon with which to defend himself.

There was none at his belt. His revolver had been lost during that savage fight in the deep pool!

Luke Barnes could hardly have explained what he did during the next few moments. He only knew that he was once more at the side of his horse, blindly fumbling at the knotted

halter, glaring fearfully over a shoulder in search of—what?

Who was that, creeping up behind him? Who—gods! the wood was full of grinning, threatening, accusing devils!

He tore his halter loose, leaped into the saddle and urged the frightened animal blindly away! He bent low in the saddle, but it was with no intention of escaping the limbs. He was thinking only of those hideous phantoms—dread realities to him!—which were reaching out to clutch and tear him from his seat, to death!

This madness lasted until his horse had regained the road and was fairly on its way home. Then, little by little his senses came back to him, and the squatter could begin to count up the terrible odds against which he must do battle for the future.

He believed he had killed Gilbert Cochrane, in that horrible death-grapple under the water, but he felt little remorse on that score. He was well rid of one unscrupulous enemy!

But the Secret Service spy had almost surely escaped, bearing with him the dangerous secrets of the Hollow Hill. And that spy knew right well the name of the man who had been elected to kill him. Who had turned a deaf ear to his broken prayers for mercy. Who had pitilessly led him to the scene of execution.

He might be bitter against all the others who had taken part in his capture and in voting for his death. But he would be doubly revengeful against his executioner.

Nor was that all, or even the worst. Green Gentry and the entire gang—with maybe the single exception of Jasper Naughton—would believe him false to his oath, false to them, in that he had turned the human bloodhound loose with life, instead of silencing him forever!

"The hull airth won't be nigh big 'nough fer to hide me from them critters!" he groaned, for almost the first time in his life shivering from physical fear.

He dug his heels savagely into the flanks of his horse, urging it on at top speed, eager to reach his home and say a parting word to his loved ones, before those pitiless enemies could get on the scent. For, until they were taken by the spy and his allies, or until in some way he could make clear his innocence, until he could convince them that the spy had not escaped through fault of his, he knew that swift flight and close hiding alone could save him from their bitter vengeance.

Truly, Luke Barnes was beginning to pay the penalty for his moral weakness! And—he knew, only too well, that this was but the beginning of his punishment.

Now that he believed he had thought of the worst that could possibly befall him, Luke Barnes grew calmer, more like his usual self. He still pressed his horse to the utmost, only thinking of its failing powers to calculate whether or no it would hold out long enough to carry him home. After that—what matter?

The poor old creature did not fail him, though he was staggering with weakness as Luke sprung to the ground at the entrance to the rude stable. Barnes removed saddle and bridle, tossing them aside, letting the jaded horse seek its shelter, while he moved toward the cabin.

A light was shining through the window, and all was still about the premises. Surely he was ahead of all his enemies?

He stole up to the window and peered in. Mrs. Barnes was nodding by the fire-place, sitting up for his home-coming, but Myra had evidently gone to bed.

He passed along to the door, opened it and entered, paying no heed to the startled cry of his wife as she noted his haggard face, his torn and still wet garments. He took a heavy revolver from its place above the mantel, and was making sure it was loaded, when he gave a gasping sound and turned swiftly toward the door.

A hurried footfall echoed on the still night, approaching the door—a hand jerked up the latch and pushed the barrier wide open. A pale, stern face showed first to the eyes of the squatter, and as its owner stepped upon the threshold, he gasped, chokingly:

"Gil Cochrane! Ghost or Devil!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MOMENT OF MADNESS.

LUKE BARNEs staggered back saved only from falling by bringing up against the side of the room, glaring wildly, superstitiously, at what he fancied must be the apparition of the man whom his fierce fingers had throttled to death at the bottom of the Deep Pool.

There were bruised, livid marks on that ghastly pale face. The head was bare, and water seemed streaming from the black hair, even as it slowly dripped from those wet garments. And in those dark eyes the superstitious squatter read—or fancied he read—a silent but none the less awful denunciation.

Mrs. Barnes was the first to rally, and though the strange actions of her husband had thrown her off her balance, she cried out sharply:

"What you want here, Gil Cochrane? Git out o' my house, ef you don't want murder done, critter!"

"It's to save, not take life that I come,

friends," quickly cried the young man, lifting a hand in warning as Luke Barnes partly raised the weapon he had so recently secured. "Hold, Luke Barnes! would you add another to your crimes, this night?"

"You ain't—go 'long, critter!" hoarsely panted the squatter. "You hain't no right hyar! You're dead, whar—"

Despite the anxiety which had urged his coming, Gilbert Cochrane gave a short laugh at this; but he quickly spoke again, in covert warning:

"Guard your tongue, Luke Barnes! I've come to help you out of—to save you from—"

He cut himself short, flushing a bit as his eyes shifted uneasily to the bewildered face of Mrs. Barnes. How could he say all he had come to say, before her?

The squatter brushed a trembling hand across his forehead, blinking rapidly as though to clear his vision. Still that phantom did not fade away and resolve itself into empty air. Then—

"You're livin', breathin'—you ain't a spook, critter?"

"I'm very much alive, Luke Barnes, as you can tell by the feel of my hand," said Cochrane, forcing a smile as he took a step forward, extending a hand as he spoke.

But the squatter shrank along the wall, lifting his pistol higher as he hoarsely panted:

"Back—keep back, critter! Don't dast to come nigher, or I'll—cuss ye, Gil Cochrane!" Sudden fire leaping into his sunken eyes as another memory flashed upon his whirling brain. "Whar's that man? What did ye do 'ith him? Speak, or—"

"Come outside, Luke, and we can talk better," hesitated Cochrane, with a nervous glance toward the door beyond which he knew Myra had her bed.

"No ye don't, critter!" growled the squatter, casting a glance of mingled defiance and fear toward the front window, as though expecting to find himself even then covered by firearms in the grip of his enemies. "I'll ruther kill ye now then to run into any o' your traps!"

Shell I putt him out, father?" asked Mrs. Barnes, at this juncture. "I kin—easy! He won't dast to hurt a woman—the coward!"

"Don't say the word, Luke Barnes!" quickly interjected Cochrane. "Have you so many friends this night, that you must drive away the one who is willing to risk more than all the rest put together in your behalf? Come, man!" with a frown of impatience. "Will you listen to me, or are you bent on self-ruin?"

"Be still, mother," said Luke, trying to steady his nerves. "An' you, Gil Cochrane, whar is the man you ketched me with?"

"As Heaven hears me, I do not know," was the earnest reply, and as though to add to his words, the young man lifted a hand above his head. "And God knows, Luke Barnes, I trust you can say the same thing, with equal honesty!"

"You think I—"

"Remember, man!" sharply interposed Cochrane, with another uneasy glance toward that door. "Would you have her—would you have everybody about the place hear you?"

"Who's everybody?" firing up again with those first savage suspicions. "Hev you brung 'long a gang to finish up your ruin, critter?"

"Will you never understand that I am your friend, even against your will, man?" almost despairingly muttered Cochrane, now as from the first speaking in low, guarded tones.

He hoped that Myra was soundly sleeping. He hoped this warning might be given, this explanation made, without her waking to a full or even partial knowledge of the bitter black truth.

If Luke Barnes was not so madly prejudiced!

"In jest one word, Gil Cochrane," said Barnes, his tones low and deadly in earnest. "Hev you brung the gang with you?"

"I have not. I came alone, just as soon as I recovered my senses from the—the accident."

"What does it all mean, father?" asked the bewildered wife.

"You shet, 'Tildy Jane! An' you, Gil Cochrane—kin you sw'ar to the truth o' all that?"

"By the grave of my sainted mother, I swear that I came here all alone, Luke Barnes!"

There was a brief silence, during which the squatter stared moodily at the pistol in his hand, partially lifting the hammer and slowly twirling the heavy cylinder around between thumb and finger.

"How did you come to happen that way, tonight, Gil Cochrane?" he asked at length, lifting his eyes and seemingly trying to read the whole truth in that pale, anxious face opposite.

"Must I speak out in plain words, Luke?" with a troubled glance from the face of Mrs. Barnes, to that closed door, then on to the hard-set visage of the man. "Will you not trust me far enough to come outside for a few moments?"

"No. I ain't goin' outside. You ain't goin' outside. Not ontel you hev 'splained all how you come to do me sech mighty dirt, Gil Cochrane! An' so—I ax ye plain—what call hed you to mix up in that black business?"

"All right!" with a frown of angry reproof. "If harm comes of it, Luke Barnes, remember I did my best to spare—not you, but yours!"

"That don't matter much, now," with a con-

tortion of his face that in part betrayed how nearly he was despairing. "The hull truth 'll come out with the day, even if it hain't part knowned a'ready. So—what fetched ye thar, tonight?"

"I went in hopes of meeting you, either on the road to or coming back from Hollow Hill, Luke. 'Steady!' as the squatter gave a start. "I rode here first with a word of warning, but you were gone. I left word with Mrs. Barnes, but feared you would think it only an excuse on my part to catch a word with—with the woman I love better than my own life!"

"Drap that, Gil Cochrane! Tetch her name, an' I'll riddle ye! Jest stick to plain facts, ef ye please!"

"I am telling you the simple truth, Luke," in softened tones. "I took one wrong step, at the start, but I've tried my level best to make it right since—"

"Drap it, I warn ye, critter!" lifting his weapon, menacingly. "Ye cain't stuff me no more with lies. I want the plain truth. How come ye to pitch me in the drink an' let that cussed bloodhound loose?"

"I chanced to hear you talking, but I didn't know who it was, at first," said Cochrane, like one who found it no easy task to find the right words. "I saw two men there on the rock. I thought one was trying to scare the other, but—well, it's a dangerous spot, as you well know, Barnes," with a forced, unnatural laugh. "And I feared *an accident* might turn the joke into bitter earnest. So—I stepped forward."

"An' cut the critter loose!" viciously grated the squatter, his eyes glowing with the return of madness. "You knowed who he was?"

"I did not—I do not know him. But—"

"Cain't you tell a lie 'thout bogglin' over it, yit, Gil Cochran?" snarled the squatter, his tall figure seeming to crouch, panther-like. "Shell I tell you who he is?"

"Not now—better think of—"

"The time fer thinkin' is past, Gil Cochrane. The time fer doin' is crawlin' up, mighty lively! But afore it gits hyar—lis'en, an' I'll tell ye who the critter is you set free this night."

"He's a spy of the Gov'ment, come here to hunt heap sight better men than him or any o' his mates ever dast to be! An' he was up over our heads, peekin' down through a hole in the ruff, markin' our faces, settin' down our names, takin' notes of all that was said, fer to clap the pile o' us into jail, to starve an' rot an'—"

"That's what he was, Gil Cochrane! An' more—you was thar to help him out ef he got into trouble! You was his mate, an' you're heap sight the biggest bloodhoun' o' the couple!"

"As God hears me, Luke Barnes!" began Cochrane, only to be cut short by the fairly crazed squatter, with:

"Call on the devil, Gil Cochrane! An' let him save ye if he knows how!"

He flung up his pistol and fired. Without a groan, Cochrane fell forward on his face, and the maddened squatter leaped over his quivering body, dashing through the door and vanishing in the night!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A CHANGE OF TACTICS.

THROUGH all this rapid interchange of words, Mrs. Barnes had stood in a manner helpless, scenting danger to her husband, yet unable to even guess what shape it might assume. Only one thing was certain: now, as ever since his first unlucky appearance on the scene, Gilbert Cochrane was their bitter enemy, all the more to be dreaded because of his soft speech and pretended friendship.

Fearing an outbreak, she looked for it to come from the other side, and her whole mind was bent on doing her share to foil and frustrate it. And so, unfortunately for all concerned, she did not realize the utter desperation of her husband until too late to lift voice or hand in warning hindrance.

She saw that athletic form reel for a single instant, then fall heavily forward, face down upon the floor, like a lifeless log instead of a fellow-being.

She saw Luke Barnes, driven to madness by what he deemed the unexampled treachery of this pitiless enemy, leap across that fallen form, brandishing his still smoking revolver as he dashed outside, fleeing hastily through the gloom.

"Luke! my man!" the poor woman gasped, rather than cried, that awful sight causing her to stagger as though drunk. "Luke! don't—come back, Luke!"

From behind her rose a cry, frightened, yet full of mingling indignation and grief, but Mrs. Barnes never heeded if she heard. She had thoughts only for the fleeing avenger—for her husband, the gallant wooer of her girlhood's prime.

She banished that awful sensation of dizzy sickness, and sprung toward the door, though in doing so she was forced to brush close past that still, death-like shape lying on the floor, a pool of hideous red stuff slowly creeping out and up from his black hair.

She never gave that single glance. All she thought of was the man she loved, fleeing through the night—to what?

"Luke—husband—father!" she cried, as she left the cabin behind her, both hands pushing back her loosened hair as she cast a fearful glance around her.

No voice came back in answer, but she heard the rapid jump of a startled horse near the stable, and as she looked that way, she caught a passing glimpse of horse and rider as the squatter dashed off into the gloom as swiftly as he could frighten or punish his second horse into running.

"Luke—come back!"

Still no answer, and then the thump-thump-thump of hoofs died away in the distance.

Gone! gone without a parting word to wife or child! Gone, and only a few vague hints by which his present peril might be guessed at! If he had only said something first! If he had only told her what he had to fear, and how she could best throw his enemies off the scent. If that demon, Gil Cochrane—

For the first time Mrs. Barnes began to realize what that shot, that fall, that lifeless figure meant. That hated name had brought it all to her, and for a brief space the poor woman stood like one petrified with horror.

But it lasted only a few moments. Then she knew what the first portion of her work consisted of; hiding from all others that dread punishment—she was far too loyal to think of or call that killing a crime.

She bent an ear to listen, but not a sound came back from the direction in which Luke Barnes had fled. And then she turned back to the cabin, her view within being cut off by the partly closed door.

She pushed this back, to stop short with a sharp gasping pain at the sight that greeted her eyes; Myra, crouching by the side of the senseless man, holding his bloody head in her arms, sobbing and moaning like one half distraught.

"You Myr' Ellen Barnes!" ejaculated the elder woman, that sight restoring all her old-time sharpness of voice and wit and temper. "You dast! An' him jest a-drivin' your own lawful father out o' house an' home? You git—git, I bid ye, Myr' Ellen!"

Softer words might have served her better, perhaps, though Myra had seen and heard enough of late to work a strong change in her character, or else to bring the true metal to the surface.

She shrank from that angry touch, but there was something close akin to defiance in her bright eyes as they turned to meet that look.

"He is not—for father's sake, mother, we must save his life!"

If Mrs. Barnes heard, she did not openly notice those words. She pushed Myra aside, then caught Gilbert Cochrane under the arms and dragged him further into the room, leaving space to completely close the door.

She sprung to this as a real or fancied sound came through the night, and eagerly she looked about the place. She could see no human being, and with those fresh fears awakened, she dare not call aloud on the name of her husband.

He had spoken of bitter enemies. He had hinted at being hunted down by human bloodhounds. Even now they might be lying in wait—be crawling up to surround the house in hopes of capturing him, or at least of finding evidence to draw their cruel toils still more tightly around their longed-for victim!

She drew back, closing the door and swinging the heavy oaken bar into place. She turned—to see Gilbert Cochrane leaning on one elbow, staring bewilderedly about him!

"Then you ain't—Myr' Ellen!"

The girl was kneeling where she had staggered under that fierce push. Her hands were clasped, and tears were visible on her face. She was fully dressed, just as though she had not retired hours before.

Gilbert Cochrane started to a sitting posture as he heard that loved name, and when Mrs. Barnes pointed sternly to the chamber door, now ajar, his gaze mechanically followed the motion.

"Myra!" he faintly cried, strong emotions doing battle on his bruised and blood-marked face. "You heard—I hoped to keep it from you, darling!"

"Keep what from her?" demanded Mrs. Barnes, almost fiercely. "Ef you ever dast to hint that my man's done any wrong, I'll finish up the job he begun! I will, ef it loses me my mortal soul!"

"Hush!" frowned the still half-stunned man, with a warning motion of his head toward the maiden. "Don't let her know—"

"Too late for that, Mr. Cochrane," said Myra herself, bravely trying to steady her voice as she rose unsteadily to her feet. "I heard all that—Oh, sir!" losing her bravely fought-for composure, and holding out her tightly-clasped hands toward the young man. "He didn't mean it! It just happened! He was driven crazy by—"

"That's jest it, Gil Cochrane!" fiercely interposed the wife, as she thrust her form between the couple. "Driv' plum' crazy by you an' the likes o' you! Ef he hed killed you, 'twould 'a' been so much the better fer all the rest o' the decent world—so thar!"

"Mother—don't!" panted Myra, pushing the elder aside with a strength lent by the emergency. "She is wild, Mr. Cochrane, and don't know what she says. And so was he—my poor father? He didn't mean to hurt you—it just happened so! And—you won't harm him for what was just an accident? You'll spare him, sir?"

A faint smile lighted up that face, and Gilbert's voice was soft and low as he caught the trembling hands held out so appealingly, and rising to his feet as he did so.

"Even if I had ever meant Luke Barnes evil, Myra, your prayer for mercy would disarm me. But I never—from the first I have tried my level best to save him from harm. I even—"

"You kin talk an' talk an' talk no eend, Gil Cochrane!" spluttered Mrs. Barnes, implacably. "But my man said he owed it all 'long o' your doin's, an' ef you dast to even hint that he didn't speak true, you lie, an' I know it!"

"Mother!" quavered Myra, her cheeks blanching again at that harsh speech. "For father's dear sake—don't!"

"It is for his dear sake, Myra," said Cochrane, smiling again as he glanced from face to face. "And I honor your mother for standing up so bravely in defense of her husband."

"I don't want your praise nur your honor, Gil Cochrane. I jest want to see the size o' your bigness fillin' the doorway yender. An' I want your back turned this way, mind ye!"

She sprung across the room, and had a hand on the oaken bar, when Cochrane quickly called out:

"Wait—for Luke's sake, Mrs. Barnes!"

"I'm doin' it all fer his sake; an' mind ye, Gil Cochrane, ef harm comes to him 'long o' your work, I'll hev revenge onto ye ef you try to hide plum' on the other side o' the earth—so thar!"

"Instead of working him harm, I'm doing all I know to save him from harm that comes from others. I will save him, if you'll only let me, Mrs. Barnes!"

There was a touch of angry impatience in his tones now, and Myra detected it. Fearing lest her mother, in her mad prejudice, would make a bad matter worse, she once more interposed:

"Hear what he has to say, mother. It can't make matters worse, and it may—I believe he means us well!"

"Again, thank you for that, Myra Barnes," quickly uttered the young man, something of his passionate adoration glowing in his eyes as he met her half-doubting glance. "I swear to you both that, whatever I may have felt in the past, when I did not fully understand you, I have only your good at heart this night. I can prove as much, if you, Mrs. Barnes, will only hear me out."

The woman hesitated. She still felt that this man was their bitter enemy, all the more dangerous since he had changed his tactics. She could not trust him against the fierce denunciations of her own husband. But—was there nothing to be gained through temporizing? If this bloodhound was delayed in taking the scent, would it not help her man to escape?

Where everything seemed so desperately against them, even a frail chance like this was not to be recklessly cast aside. And though her face openly betrayed much of her thoughts to those keen eyes, she made a show of being convinced, saying slowly:

"Ef you kin cl'ar yourself, Gil Cochrane, mebbe I'd ought to let ye hev a chaintce. But—Waal, what hev you to say, anyhow?"

Now that he was granted the permission he had sought, Gilbert Cochrane hardly knew how to take advantage of it. If Mrs. Barnes had been alone with him, he would have told the whole ugly truth. But how could he brand the father before the eyes of his daughter?

Something of this showed in his face, and Myra read it correctly.

"I was awake when poor father came home, Mr. Cochrane," she said, in low, unsteady tones. "I heard all that was said, so—do not be afraid that the whole truth will break me down. I'm his—her child, and I know that, however black things may seem, father can explain all away without making his daughter blush for her parent!"

"I know. He is far more sinned against than sinned, but—Well, better to hear the story from the lips of a friend than wait for his enemies to spread it broadcast!

"It sounds hard, but I know Luke never really meant to kill the spy. He was just trying to frighten him into running away without making use of his information, you see."

"What spy?" sharply demanded Mrs. Barnes. Cochrane pressed a hand to his head, trying to still that horrible throbbing. His face was deathly pale, and he visibly staggered as he closed his eyes for an instant.

Myra saw this, and started toward him, with a low cry. But he lifted a hand as his eyes opened, and she fell back.

"I'm all right—a momentary faintness, nothing worse. But as I started to say, if any one comes to you, declare that you know nothing; that Luke was called to town on important business; and refer them to me if they persist. I'll swear that he never meant harm—that he was only trying to scare the rascal out of the county. And—"

Once more that deathly faintness came over him, and only by reeling back to the wall was he saved from falling at full length.

CHAPTER XXX.

A JOB FOR THE SHERIFF.

"MOTHER, help!" gasped Myra, faintly. "He's dying—that shot—"

But Gilbert Cochrane forced a laugh as he rallied his failing powers by a desperate effort.

"I'm—I'm all right. Just a bit of—what was I trying to tell you?" he huskily mumbled, trying hard to clear his buzzing brain.

"About Luke—the spy, which—cain't you talk out, man alive?"

"Yes—I know, now," speaking more naturally. "Luke must have gone to meet the moonshiners. They caught a spy, and Luke was set to frighten him. I happened along and—somehow, the fellow got away."

"You set him free? You was helpin' him, tryin' to trap my man!" fiercely panted the wife, all her suspicions renewed by those words. "Ef harm comes to him, I'll hunt you to your grave, Gil Cochrane!"

Something of her anger flashed into that pale face, but as his eyes turned toward Myra, seeing her white, scared yet half-sympathizing features, his manner softened as rapidly. And to her he spoke, alone:

"I'm not hurt, Myra, but terribly tired. I had to fight hard to save your father from—from falling victim to his false friends. I meant to tell the whole story, but I fear I can't. I must get where I can have rest and—"

"You are hurt! Let us tend to your wound, first."

"I'd give more for a word of friendship than all the medicine in the world, Myra Barnes! And if you can only believe in me, I'll ask no more!"

Mrs. Barnes said something, but neither of the young people heard or heeded her. Their eyes met, and Myra seemed trying to read the truth which lay hidden there. She believed she saw it, and impulsively cried:

"I never knew you—never knew how noble you really are—until this moment, Gilbert! Save my poor father, and I'll—"

She took his hand and tried to lift it to her lips. Instead, Gilbert used it to draw her closer, bending and printing a passionate kiss on her lips.

"I'll save him if mortal man can, my love! If you see him before I do, warn him to shun the moonshiners, and to lay low. If he quits that ugly work, I'll see that he comes to no harm for his past doings in that line. And—I must go—I fear I'm going to be—"

His voice choked, and he staggered as he turned to the door. Myra started as though to aid him, but he motioned her back. And leaving the cabin he staggered away to where his horse was tethered, climbing painfully into the saddle, turning the animal's head toward home.

He was only dimly conscious of the rapid ride. He hardly knew how he dismounted and reached the veranda, where he sank in a heap to the horror of old Pomp, to whom he managed to mutter:

"Put me to bed—don't wake sheriff—don't wake sheriff!"

And so it came about that John Hooper slept peacefully through the remainder of that long night, only waking when the sun was shining brightly through the curtain at his eastern window, staring around him with a dazed, bewildered air, only roused to complete consciousness by the sharp, unpleasant aching in his entire body and every limb. It was a most disagreeable reminder, but it swiftly brought back his memory by recalling that hideous ride.

"Wake up, sheriff!" came a sharply impatient voice from just outside his chamber door, accompanied by a thumping on the panel. "Are you dead, man alive?"

"If dead, how could I be alive?" yawned Hooper, turning to slip his painfully-stiff legs from under cover. "Who the deuce are you, and what you want, anyway?" his pains sharpening his temper.

"Dickson—and I want you, in a hurry, too!"

Hooper recognized both voice and name now, and as the speaker was a friend and strong partisan, both in one, he crossed the floor just as he was, to give him admittance.

"No—can't come in," was the hasty reply. "Got a job for you, and the quicker you git your duds on the better!"

"What sort of a job?" asked Hooper, putting on his garments as rapidly as his sorely-stiffened limbs would permit.

"Murder—no less!"

"What? Who? Where?"

Dickson hesitated, casting a quick and seemingly frightened look around before coming closer to ask in a guarded whisper:

"Where's Cochrane?"

"How should I know? Didn't you just rouse me out? I was sleeping ninety miles an hour, I do reckon!" with a laugh. "But what's the matter with you, man? You act as though you were afraid of seeing a ghost, or something about that caliber!"

"I feel mighty that way, too!" frowned

Dickson, but still using the guarded tone of voice. "Do you reckon he's skipped, sheriff?"

"Who's skipped? What in time are you trying to get through you, anyway? Curse your nods and winks! speak out white fashion!"

"Gil Cochrane—worse luck that I've got to say such a thing!"

"What about—why, you infernal lunk-head!" bursting into a sudden rage as he at last caught a suspicion of the truth. "Do mean to even hint that Cochrane's mixed up in a murder scrape? To me?"

"You can't hope any harder than I do that he may be able to clear himself, John Hooper, but, all the same, it looks mighty black for him!" doggedly uttered the man, flushing a bit under that angry glare.

"How black? Who's dead? And what right have you to come into a man's own house to whisper hints of evil against him?"

"Just so black, sheriff," Dickson said, growing cooler as the other heated up. "A man has been found stone cold with a knife planted between his shoulders. And that knife belongs to Gilbert Cochrane! Just as black as that, sheriff—no less!"

"What man?"

"A stranger to these parts, I understand, but—"

"Then you don't know?" sneered Hooper, rallying once more, stanch in his friendship. "You charge an honest, upright, Christian gentleman with being a bloody murderer, simply on belief?"

"I don't know the man, but I do know he's dead. I do know that the ivory-handled knife half the country can swear to as belonging to Gilbert Cochrane killed him. And I know that I was sent here to hurry you to the spot where the dead man was discovered. Isn't that enough?"

"For rousing me, but not for accusing an innocent man of murder," boldly persisted Hooper, though his heart was beginning to sink within him, for he remembered that, only the day before, he had seen that very weapon in the hand of his friend.

By this time he had finished dressing, and leaving the room, he caught sight of old Pomp, his black face turned to an ashen gray, seemingly on guard before the chamber door of his young master.

The old negro tried to prevent an entrance, but Hooper pushed him to one side and opened the door. He paused for an instant on the threshold, staring at the face outlined against the white pillow-case.

It was ghastly pale, save where the scratches and bruises had turned dark. It looked like the face of a corpse, but as he moved closer, the sheriff saw that his host was breathing, slowly, faintly, but very unlike a dead man.

"Look at his clothes!" muttered Dickson, who had followed the sheriff into the chamber. "All wet, and torn, and muddy!"

The sheriff shook Gilbert, lightly at first, then more strongly; but there came no answer. The young man lay in a stupor too profound for him to break it by such means. And yet, barring that ghastly pallor, he seemed to be lost in a healthful slumber.

"Dat's what done skeered me so turrible, Mars' Sheriff," whimpered old Pomp, trembling like a leaf. "He bin dat way fo' mighty long time, boss, an' ole Pomp pow'ful skeered!"

"Go send a nigger after the doctor, then come back and mount guard over this door, Pomp. Don't let anybody in before I come, unless it is the doctor, or I'll skin you alive! Come, Dickson—we'll go look at this wonderful find of yours!"

Together the two men went down-stairs and left the house, stopping at the stable only long enough to saddle and bridle a horse for Hooper to ride. Dickson, of course, had his own animal handy, since he had ridden to the Cochrane place.

Not until they were fairly on the road did Sheriff Hooper ask any questions, and then they came hot and straight as bullets from a gun.

Dickson told what he knew, but that was not much more than he had already let drop. A man had been discovered, dead, with a knife thrust to its hilt in his back, directly between his shoulders. The location of the wound was such that it could not possibly be deemed suicide. Beyond a doubt the poor fellow had been murdered.

"And the worst of it all is that the knife has been recognized and fully identified as that carried for years by Gilbert Cochrane!" was his concluding statement.

Sheriff Hooper said nothing, though his stern face grew clouded. That knife was not one to be easily mistaken, though, if the blade was entirely buried in the flesh, there might still be an error; for on the steel itself was etched the full name of its owner, if indeed this fatal weapon was the one belonging to Gilbert Cochrane.

If that name was found—but it could not be possible!

CHAPTER XXXI.

BIG BANDY BEARS WITNESS.

SHERIFF HOOPER asked only one more question of his guide before the scene of the tragedy

was reached: who had discovered and given the alarm of murder?

"Tom Grigsby, the major's son. Just stumbled over it, as ye might say, while out looking for a stray cow, early this morning. Scared the boy powerful bad, I reckon, but he run home and told his pap. Major come just a-whooping up to my place, and we set out together."

"Good enough, if you haven't let any others into the secret, for if I'm not mighty off in my reckoning, I'll want to take a quiet, easy look at matters and things before they get all blotted out by a crowd."

Dickson forced a cough, but though this gave him an excuse for averting his face, he knew that those keen, searching eyes were fixed upon him. He could feel them scorch the back of his neck!

He knew, too, that the whole truth must speedily come out, for they were not far from the scene of the murder. And so he made a virtue of necessity, as it were.

"Well, you see, sheriff," very busy with his reins while making a beginning. "Little Tom met up with Greenman on his way home, and had to explain something about his big hurry. And we hit a couple or two more on our way there, so—"

"The entire county is on the spot, of course!" almost savagely snarled the sheriff, his brow black as midnight with a frown.

"A right smart crowd by this time, I do reckon," meekly added the honest farmer. "Such news is just terrible for spreading!"

Sheriff Hooper made no further remark, but sent his spirited mount ahead at full run. He no longer required a guide. He could hear excited voices blending in an unpleasant hum, and this told him where the murdered man must still be lying in his gore.

Almost the first face and figure he recognized as he came on the grounds, were those of Green Gentry, and it was his sharp command that cleared a lane for the representative of the law.

"Make room, neighbors!" he cried aloud. "Now we'll get at the bottom facts, since Sheriff Hooper is here to show us the ropes! Make way, and— Glad to see you, sheriff, for this looks like a mighty ugly job!"

But Hooper paid no attention to either the words or to the hand which would have greeted him. He left his horse to the care of whoever might take charge of the animal, pushing direct to the corpse.

For corpse it was, beyond the shadow of a doubt!

The body was lying on its face, as though it had not moved, even by so much as a quiver of the limbs, since the fatal blow was given. The ivory haft of a knife was protruding from his back, so near the center line that it seemed likely the spinal column had been divided by the steel. No hat was on the head, its only protection being a neglected shock of reddish hair. The face was only partially visible, for seemingly no hand had ventured to disturb the body.

There was nothing strange in that fact. Nowhere else is the law, when connected with the duties of a coroner, so sacredly believed in and universally adhered to, as in a country place; and if hardly more than half civilized, so much the better. And among these moonshiners, old soldiers, squatters and farmers, three-fourths of them would have expected to be arrested as little less guilty than the actual murderer if they touched or moved the corpse before the coroner had "viewed it," according to rule.

"Does any one recognize the man?" asked Hooper, after making a hasty examination of the immediate surroundings.

"A heap of us see'd him down at the barbecue, yest'day, sheriff," one of those close to his elbow volunteered. "He said he was a old soldier—"

"From Shelby's Brigade!"

"Butchered like a dog!"

"An old vet like that! And who done it?"

A chorus of cries broke forth, but as that significant question was asked, silence instantly reigned.

Sheriff Hooper knew the reason, only too well. He had recognized that ivory-hilted knife, and knew, almost beyond a doubt, that it had been in possession of his friend and host, Gilbert Cochrane, only a few short hours before being discovered here—an assassin's tool!

And yet—if he only dared draw forth the weapon far enough to gain a fair view of the blade itself! If he could only prove that it had no name—or bore another name—on its side!

Not for an instant would he believe that Gilbert Cochrane had committed such an awful crime, even though there kept rising before his mind's eye that bruised face, those torn and disordered garments. Gilbert Cochrane was not that sort of a man!

"Did you ever see a knife with a handle like that, sheriff?" asked one of his near neighbors, with that ugly suspicion plainly showing in both face and voice. "Seems to me I can place it!"

"Yes—dozens of 'em!" coolly answered Hooper, gazing keenly around at the stern faces on every side, to pause with something of a start as he caught sight of Big Bandy drawing near, curiosity marked on his scarred face.

"This way, brigadier!" called out Green Gentry, lifting a hand to beckon the veteran forward. "He ought to know if what we most of us begin to fear is correct. He looked the knife all over yesterday, and seemed particularly struck with it. Ask him, sheriff!"

It was this very thing Hooper feared when he recognized that figure in army over-coat and military hat. Like a revelation it had come upon him; how closely Big Bandy had inspected that same knife when Gilbert Cochrane defended him, Hooper, against Jasper Naughton.

"Mornin', gentlemen," nodded the brigadier in a general salutation, but cutting it short by a sudden ejaculation as his eyes rested on that prostrate figure.

"You recognize the man, General Bandy?" hurriedly asked Hooper, more to postpone the almost inevitable recognition of that weapon.

If that white handle was not so conspicuous!

Big Bandy did not reply immediately. He slowly approached the body, seemingly drawn to it by much such a fascination as a snake is fabled to exercise over a fluttering bird. And dropping to his knees by its side, he bent over until one cheek brushed the grass, gazing keenly, carefully at the side of the face most uncovered.

"Look at the knife into the back o' him, Big Bandy!" harshly said Jasper Naughton, his pale, bruised face and dark eyes showing a poorly hidden triumph as he added: "Who owns a knife jest like that?"

"Silence!" harshly ordered Hooper, flashing an ugly look in that direction. "I asked if you had ever seen this man before, Bandy?"

"Never afore yest'day, at the barbecue. He went home 'long ith me, last night. The moonshiners killed him, I do reckon!"

Instantly a commotion arose among the crowd at that blunt assertion, and while some faces flushed hotly with indignation, others grew pale with something not far akin to fear.

"It's a lie!" cried Jasper Naughton, his eyes ablaze, his hands clinched and menacing. "Gil Cochrane done it!"

"Do you publicly make that charge, my fine fellow?" sternly demanded Hooper, now that the word he feared had been fairly pronounced, proving himself quite equal to the occasion. "Will you back up your words by positive proof? For when you openly charge an honorable gentleman with foul murder, you've got to prove it, or as publicly eat your own words, sir!"

"I've seen him totin' that same knife a thousand times!"

"There are thousands of ivory-handled knives, made on that same pattern," sneered the sheriff. "How can you swear to this particular one, Mr. Naughton?"

"Beca'se it's got his name prented onto the blade of it!" with a fierce if short laugh of triumph. "You pull it out an' see fer your own self, ef ye dast, John Hooper!"

"Did you make sure that very name was on the blade before you stuck it into the poor devil, Naughton?"

The young man sprung back, his bruised face looking fairly ghastly under this sharp question. He caught at a pistol, but his fingers trembled so violently that he failed to jerk forth the weapon in time. He saw Hooper was armed, ready to anticipate a shot, and with a desperate effort he rallied himself, to hoarsely utter:

"You dast—you dast to say that?"

Hooper laughed, his tones softened and even placable once more:

"You see for yourself how mighty easy it is to fling wild accusations or wilder hints abroad, Mr. Naughton. Let the lesson teach you to bridle your brash tongue. As for your dare—no, I dare not, until the coroner is here to take charge of the corpse. And I warn you, one and all, not to touch man or weapon, unless you're ready to stand your share of the trial which must surely follow!"

That warning was sufficient, for the time being, at least, and turning toward the brigadier once more, Hooper asked:

"Why are you so confident that the moonshiners killed the fellow, General Bandy? You must have something to back up your words, for a man of your caliber does not sling out his words without rhyme or reason."

"The critter called himself Barney Budge. He went home 'long ith me, last night. He hed a bit o' paper which I ketchet him readin' over. It was a plan o' part o' the Holler Hill—the part whar— Waal, ye needn't begin to squirm this airily, gentlemen!" he laughed, grimly, as another ugly sound came from some of the crowd. "I ain't lettin' out no secrets, so long's I don't p'int out the very place, be I?"

"Never mind about the map, general," muttered Hooper, for bold as he undeniably was, he did not care to get into an open row with those suspected of running illicit stills, just then.

"You mean?"

"That I made out he was a rev'nue spy, tryin' to pump me. He made up a long cock-an'-bull story 'bout Uncle Jupe, an' a treasure o' gold, an' sech-like; but I known him better. An' so—I hed a bit of a squabble with the critter. I burnt up his map, fer one thing. An' he went away in the dark."

"Whar's the proof that he wasn't killed by

Gil Cochrane?" asked Naughton, once more himself. "Kin you sw'ar that ain't the knife you see Cochrane hev, no longer ago'n yest'day, Big Bandy?"

"Let the knife alone, gentlemen," abruptly said Hooper, making his way toward the tree to which his borrowed horse had been tethered. "It is against all law, remember, to touch the corpse or anything about him, until the coroner can view the body. I'm going after him now!"

"We've already sent word, sheriff!" cried out Green Gentry, but if he heard, Hooper did not heed.

"Guard the body, Dickson, and you, Major Grigsby," he called out as he released his horse and leaped into the saddle, his soreness forgotten in his fears for his friend. "Don't let a finger touch it until I'm back with the coroner!"

Under cover of this diversion, Big Bandy also beat a hasty retreat, though Jasper Naughton shouted after him until Green Gentry dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder, backed up by a keen frown of warning.

Dickson and Grigsby promptly mounted guard over the dead man, not a little elated by the prominence thus conferred upon them. Gentry and Naughton, with a few others, drew a little apart, ostensibly to discuss the tragedy in semi-privacy. But if such was their intention, they quickly forgot it in rising indignation, for their words were soon audible to all on the ground.

They spoke of the murdered man as an old soldier, who had proved his nobility on a score hardly contested battlefields. He was one of Shelby's Brigade—Jo Shelby—name to conjure by, in Missouri!—had known and loved him. Now—murdered!

"And whose hand laid him low?" fiercely demanded Gentry, the very personification of honest indignation. "Whose but that of the man who forgot his bloody weapon in his fear born of striking one who wore the Southern gray? Who but Gilbert Cochrane, the renegade Missourian! The man who fought against his own country! The associate of Federal sharks and bloodhounds! A cowardly spy himself, selling his neighbors for even less than the traditional thirty pieces of silver."

If he spoke further, his voice was lost in that wild tumult. The most horrible yell that can be lifted by man: *the yell for human blood!*

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BRIGADIER ON GUARD.

SHERIFF HOOPER put spurs to his horse, and rode swiftly away from the scene of the tragedy, bowing low in the saddle like one who fully expects a summons to halt, issued through a rifled tube!

He really did expect something of the sort, and waited to draw a full breath, until a patch of timber effectually shut him out of sight of the crowd gathered around the dead man.

"The devils!" he panted, with a backward glance as he dashed on at the best speed his good mount was capable of. "Will they scent the trick? Will they chase?"

Those who hoped to catch him, as he now rode, must indeed be well mounted! But John Hooper was not thinking of himself just then, save as his freedom concerned another.

He felt morally certain that, when the ivory-handled knife was drawn from its cold sheath, the name of Gilbert Cochrane would surely be revealed, etched on the steel itself.

"I've handled it too often not to know that!" he mused, frowning darkly as he sped along toward the old Barbour place. "Those lunkheads would take the name for positive proof, and once fairly set in motion, they'd need half their number killed before stopping to take a second thought! And—sheriff or no sheriff, law or no law, I'm not going to stand by and see an innocent man butchered!"

"Innocent!"

Over and over that word flashed through his brain. He cared nothing for the seeming proof. He knew that Gilbert Cochrane was innocent of this foul murder.

Yes, innocent! Even though there kept coming up before him that bruised face, those torn and mud-stained garments. Though he knew Gilbert Cochrane must surely have been abroad that night, after putting him to bed, he would not let a single doubt linger in his mind.

"He can explain it all away, if he has a fair chance. And that chance I'm going to give him, if it kills me!" he mentally declared.

He knew the nature of the men whom he had left behind him. He knew that there were many law-breakers among them. He knew that many of them were known as moonshiners. He had been given a list of names as men who needed watching, and a few who were to be arrested without delay. But he also knew that no men the wide world over, were more apt to shed blood or break bones in avenging an actual murder, however leniently they might regard one who was so unfortunate as to kill another in "a fair fight."

He knew that, sooner or later, the fatal blade must be laid bare, and that name revealed to all eyes. Then—

"The mob'll come just a-whooping!" he scowled, with an uneasy glance behind him. "Nine-tenths of 'em were rebels, and they've

mighty little love for Cochrane as it is—he wore the blue, and fought 'em hard! That'll help bring 'em—the bloodhounds!"

As swiftly as possible he covered the distance, turning his panting horse into the stable, but without losing time in unsaddling the animal, then rushing into the house, bound for the chamber where he had last seen Gilbert Cochrane lying in a stupor. But to his great delight he caught sight of his host, pale and worn, in the act of coming down-stairs!

"I'm not a ghost, sheriff!" called out Cochrane, with a faint smile as he saw Hooper start back. "Do I look so awfully rocky, this morning?"

"Thank Heaven!" cried Hooper, springing forward and gripping a hand between both of his, as he added: "Not a ghost, but you may be one, unless you're got away from here in a holy hurry, Cochrane!"

"What do you mean? Have you—drunk so early, Hooper?"

"Where's your white-handled knife, Cochrane? If you can—you've lost it!" with almost a groan as he saw that pale face change swiftly.

"Yes—I've lost it," slowly spoke Cochrane, his pale features suddenly growing hard-set.

"When? Where? How?" eagerly demanded Hooper.

"What makes you ask? What's come over you, anyway, sheriff?"

"Why can't you trust me, man alive?" almost groaned the sorely-shaken officer, casting an apprehensive look through the still open door. "Because—a man was killed, last night, and your white-handled knife was found sticking in his back!"

"What man? Did you find out his name?"

Still that strange, hard, fixed expression! And as he saw and listened, for the first time John Hooper began to doubt the innocence of his friend. He must have been more than human, not to have done so.

"A fellow called Barney Budge—he was at the barbecue, they say, and—"

"Who says so? Who knows of this—you called it murder?"

"They all say so. And—you didn't have a fight with—with anybody, last night, Cochrane?" his gaze quickly noting the fact that the young man had on a different suit of clothes.

"No, I had no fight. Surely, sheriff, you don't believe any such ugly thing against me?"

"No—of course not! Yet—who is that riding this way?"

"Big Bandy, if I don't mistake," quietly replied Cochrane, looking past the sheriff as they stood in the wide hall. "What can he be after? I didn't know he had a horse, or that—"

"Storm's a-comin', gentlemen!" cried the brigadier, making a flying leap from the saddle, and hurrying toward the house, excitedly waving his saber, still in its sheath. "Git fer kiver, sheriff! The gang is on the way, an it means lynchin'—no less!"

"Help the nigger hitch up best hosses to buggy!" cried Hooper, sharply, then turning to Cochrane and gently placing a hand on his arm, to add, gravely: "I've got to arrest you, friend!"

"Arrest me for—you dare—"

Gilbert Cochrane cut his angry speech short, shutting his eyes for an instant, his lips tightly compressed.

"To save you from the mob, Cochrane," hurriedly explained Hooper. "I know you're not guilty, but if those devils catch you here, they'll string you up out of hand, without giving you a moment in which to explain, much less prove your innocence."

"And you intend—what?"

"Taking you to town and holding you under a safe guard until the whole truth can be made clear, of course. I arrest you simply to save your life, so—be wise, and say you'll go, Cochrane!"

There was no immediate response. Cochrane turned his face away, though he need not have feared exposure from those icy, set features.

He knew, or feared, what all this meant, and he forgot the father in his love for the daughter. She must be saved such a terrible blow, let the cost be what it might. Yet—how could he best do that? By waiting for the mob, to suffer death as a vile assassin?

He decided not, though what his course of action would be, after he had escaped the gang, and had ample time in which to reflect, he could not even guess, just then.

"Ready, gentlemen!" cried Big Bandy, just then, from the stable-yard, "Lively, fer I kin hear 'em comin', hot-foot!"

Hooper ran up-stairs and brought down that damaged suit of clothes, and when these were tucked under the buggy-seat, and Gilbert had entered, he leaped in and sent the team dashing away, sending back:

"Delay them as long as you can, general!"

Big Bandy said nothing, but there was something like the battle-fever in his dark eyes as he watched them roll swiftly away, taking the opposite direction to that in which the mob might naturally be expected. And then he spoke sharply to the frightened servants:

"Shet an' lock every door in the house, niggers! Then slip out winder an' hide in the

bresh. Ef you're ketched, mind you don't know jest nothin' at all! Now—git, ye devils!"

A little more leisurely he followed the scared blacks to the house, taking up his station on the broad veranda, pacing slowly to and fro like a sentry on guard-duty. His bared saber rested lightly against his shoulder, and his scarred face was blank and expressionless, even when the excited crowd, with Green Gentry and Jasper Naughton at their head, came streaming down the road.

"How'd you get here, you rascal?" stormed Gentry, plainly taken aback by that sight, but swiftly adding: "Where's Gil Cochrane?"

"Inside his own house—whar else you reckon?"

"And Sheriff Hooper! Where is he?"

"In thar, 'restin' Cochrane, I reckon," in the same drawling, provokingly cool tones.

Gentry was plainly staggered by that answer, but he rallied quickly.

"It's just a trick to cheat the rope!" he cried, savagely. "Cochrane's a rich man, and thinks to do murder on an old soldier and get clear by using his money! Shall he, men and Southrons?"

"Down him! Hang him! Make sure work of it, now!"

"Out of the way, you crazy fool!" thundered Gentry, drawing a revolver and leaping up the steps, only to be disarmed by a swift stroke of Big Bandy's saber.

Then, before a weapon could be lifted against him, the brigadier leaped feet foremost through the one opened window close by.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A LIE, WELL MAINTAINED.

SHERIFF HOOPER proved himself as good a whip as he was a reckless rider, and not even their owner could have gotten more or better work out of that fiery span of four-year-olds.

Yet the sheriff did not seem content, for he used the silk and kept glancing backward, frowning blackly as he listened for the thump-thump of horses' hoofs rising above the rattle of their wheels. If he might only have a bit of smooth, sandy road for an instant or so!

"Are you armed, Cochrane?" he asked, when a bend in the road carried them fairly out of sight of the Barbour Place.

"I have a revolver; yes."

"Then—use it to kill, if those devils catch us up and try to take you from under my wing. Understand?"

Gilbert nodded assent, but did not make any promise. He had not had time in which to decide on his best course of action, and with so much hanging in the balance, he could not speak off-hand.

The word brought by Sheriff Hooper had well-nigh stunned him, mind and body, for it seemed to explain much of what troubled him in Luke Barnes of late.

He remembered having that ivory-handled knife in his hand when he rushed to the flat rock above the Deep Pool, to save the father of his loved one from doing murder most foul. He remembered dropping it, after making one swift slash across the ropes which bound the stranger; then dropping the weapon as Luke Barnes leaped so savagely upon him.

Now—how had the spy come by his death?

He knew that he had given a slash, not a stroke or a thrust, at those bonds, so that his hand could not possibly have driven the keen blade home, as Hooper said it had been found. Yet—even as he had gone down before that assault, he had seen the bound man falling. Then—might not he have fallen on the knife, his weight driving it home?

That seemed highly improbable, but it was not altogether impossible. Even stranger deaths were on record.

But, if this was the cause of his death, how had the spy escaped being discovered by the hasty yet fairly thorough search which he, Gilbert Cochrane, had made at and near the flat rock, as soon as he recovered his senses after that awful death-grapple with Luke Barnes?

"Where was he found—this dead man?" he asked, with a brief look into the anxious face of his friend. "Tell me all about it, please."

Hooper tried to drive away the ugly fear that was assailing his brain, but hardly succeeded. If wholly innocent, why did not Cochrane act more naturally? It was not through physical fear, for a bolder man never drew the breath of life. And though he acted and looked so oddly, so entirely unlike himself, his tones were even, his muscles under perfect control.

Thus far he had been unable to detect signs of pursuit, and his fears on that point partially lulled to rest, Sheriff Hooper complied with his companion's request, briefly but clearly explaining all he knew about the ugly affair.

While doing this, he closely if covertly watched that pale face, and by the time he was through with his explanations, he was morally certain that, if not the guilty being himself, Gilbert Cochrane knew whose hand had dealt that fatal blow.

During that same interval, Gilbert Cochrane was also using his brain, and though he kept from scanning the face of his companion, he

readily divined much of the suspicion which was growing in his mind. And thus it came that his answer was ready when Hooper bluntly asked him once more to explain how and where he had lost his knife.

"You had a fight with somebody. Your clothes under the seat, here, plainly prove that. I know you didn't kill the fellow with your own hand, but *your knife* let out his life! How? Who could have used your weapon to kill the poor fellow?"

"You know I'm hardly in touch with you on this moonshining matter, sheriff. And so—after you were soundly sleeping—I went to drop a hint where it would do the most good. And, by pure accident, I happened on two men near the Deep Pool, one bound, the other holding him captive. I feared trouble, and chipped in. I cut the fellow loose, but dropped my knife in doing so. Then—the other fellow closed with me, and we took a tumble into the water."

He went on to describe that fierce fight, and how he had escaped death as by a miracle. He told how he searched for the man whom he had tried to set free, but without finding him or the knife he had dropped. Then—he had come home.

"Who was the fellow you fought with?" asked Hooper, closely watching that pale, stern face.

"That I'm unable to tell you, sheriff," was the grave reply. "I had no time for a second look, before he was on me—heavy!"

"There was light enough to show you one man was bound, the other man free. You could see to cut the ropes. Then—Look here, Cochrane, do you comprehend just what this ugly scrape amounts to? Do you realize that unless the real criminal is captured, your own life is in deadly peril?"

"It bears that look, certainly!" with a grim smile. "But what more can I say or do? I've told you everything I possibly can."

"But one thing—the thing, Cochrane! Who was the man you had that fight with? Who are you trying to shield from—Ha!" with his face lighting up as with conviction. "There's only one man on the footstool for whom you'd run such chances! Luke Barnes!"

Gilbert Cochrane forced a laugh, hard and mocking.

"Are you crazy, sheriff? Barnes hates me worse than poison!"

"But his daughter don't!"

"Drop that—don't bring the name of any lady into such a miserable affair, John Hooper! I tell you that you're wrong, man!"

"Wasn't it Luke Barnes you had that fight with? On your oath?"

"It was not Luke Barnes I had the fight with at Deep Pool," coldly, deliberately said Gilbert, gazing steadily into those keen, anxious eyes. "He is tall, slender, dark. That man was short and thick-set, and from the brief look I had at him, I should say his hair was either gray or else light as flax."

Sheriff Hooper gave a sound that was almost as much curse as it was groan. He more firmly than ever believed that Gilbert Cochrane was risking his own reputation in shielding the life of the real criminal, but how could he prove this, against the firm denial of the one who was, or who ought to be, the most eager to bring the actual sinner to justice?

Cool, wary, determined to shield the girl he loved so passionately, as far as lay in his power, Gilbert met and parried the countless questions with which Hooper strove to get at the truth, during their hasty flight. Not once did he permit his tongue to trip, and Hooper was on the point of abandoning the effort in despair, when behind them came the rapid clatter of a horse's hoofs.

"Only one!" he muttered, hitching a revolver around convenient to his hand. "Unless they come thicker than that sound indicates, Cochrane, you want to leave it all to me."

"Of course, since I'm under arrest," coldly smiled the other.

But two minutes later, all thoughts of fighting vanished, for the time being, at least.

"The brigadier, by holy!" ejaculated Hooper, tightening the reins a bit, giving the horses a chance to catch their breath while Big Bandy overhauled them.

"Keep a-goin', critters!" the brigadier called out, his long beard flying in the breeze created by his own rapid motion. "The hull kit an' comp'ny on 'em'll be 'long this way afore many minutes!"

"They'll need to bring more than one company to take my prisoner, with you to act as my posse, brigadier!" laughed the sheriff. "Make your report: how did you give them the slip?"

As they proceeded at a rapid pace, Big Bandy explained how he had held the enemy in check as long as possible, disarming Gentry, and then jumping in at a window, which he could guard with his saber, and still be out of range of their pistols or guns.

This he did, dashing Gentry back with a stroke across the face with the flat of his weapon, when that fellow tried to follow close at his heels.

"Course I didn't keer to kill an' slosh 'round permiscuous, ye know, gentlemen," apologized

the brigadier. "That'd make matters jest so much the wuss fer everybody. So—I jest blowed my trumpet as fierce as I knowned, an' kept the old saber flashin' back an' fo'th across the winder. An' so I held 'em in check ontel Gentry made 'em fetch a log an' ram down the door. Then I tuck to a side winder, jumpin' out jest as the gang come bu'stin' inside. An' I ketched up this critter o' yours, Cochrane, an' was jest makin' the road when they diskivered the trick. Gentry an' some others tuck a crack or two at me as I came off, hot-foot, but they wasted tha'r lead. An' hyar I be!"

"Of course they'll follow us?"

"I reckon they will, but mebbe you'll throw 'em off by takin' this road, 'stead o' t'other. I jest hit it by a happen-so, ye mought say."

"Where are you taking me, sheriff?"

"To Jimtown, of course. I can only guard you against that infernal mob by claiming you as a prisoner, arrested for murder. If you don't like the notion, blame yourself for holding back the truth, Cochrane!"

"I've told you the truth."

"But not the *whole* truth! Don't you *know*, man alive, that *you* never stuck that poor devil?"

"I told you I didn't, sheriff."

"But you refuse to tell me who *did*, confound it all!"

"Because I don't know. Good reason, isn't it?"

"Some one o' them moonshiners must 'a' stuck the critter, fer a spy, which I'm mighty nigh dead sart'n he was, too!" grimly chimed in the brigadier. "I sent 'em a warnin', which mebbe hed somethin' to do with it, though I didn't mean it to turn out jest so bad."

This relieved Cochrane from questioning for a time, as Hooper closely cross-examined General Bandy as to the part he had played in that black night's work; and before he had thoroughly satisfied himself Jimtown, was reached.

This was not the county-seat, and consequently had no regular jail within its limits, but Hooper took his prisoner to the house of a true friend, where he hoped to be able to guard him against the more than probable mob, at least until the help for which he at once telegraphed could reach him.

Big Bandy's first care was to stable the horse which had done him such good service, then make himself as little conspicuous as might be when the crowd, with Gentry and Naughton at their head, rode into town. All were armed, and all looked like men who had stern business on hand; but they had cooled down considerably, and made no loud threats at first, scattering among the curious citizens and telling the story of the tragedy, as they saw it.

Having taken what precautions he could, Sheriff Hooper once more sought to extract the whole truth from the lips of his prisoner, sticking to the point with a pertinacity worthy a better result. For Gilbert Cochrane steadily adhered to the story he had told at first. He did not know who the man was with whom he had had that fight. All he could be positive of, was that it could not possibly have been Luke Barnes, as Hooper more than suspected.

As the day grew older, Green Gentry and Jasper Naughton, ably backed by the others of the evil gang, made the most of their time, exciting vengeful feelings against Gilbert Cochrane, as having murdered an old Confederate soldier—one of the famous "Shelby's Brigade."

And by the time the shades of evening began to settle over the little town, matters grew ripe for carrying out their deadly plot.

There was little noise and less confusion, but gradually a mob began to gather before the darkened house in which Sheriff Hooper had lodged his prisoner. And when satisfied that his force surrounded the place so completely that escape would be impossible, Gentry advanced and sharply pounded at the front door.

"What's wanting, gentlemen?" quietly asked the owner, opening the door and calmly surveying the armed crowd.

"We want the man Sheriff Hooper brought here to-day, and we're going to have him, too! Come on, boys!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CUTTING HIS OWN THROAT.

"EVENIN' folks! All well, I reckon?"

It was well along in the afternoon of the day following the discovery of Barney Budge's murder, and Jasper Naughton uttered that off-hand salutation as he swaggered up to the front door at Barnes's cabin.

"Swaggered" was the right term. Naughton had been drinking freely, and this, with a sneaking sense of shame at what he bore in mind, rendered his manner far more offensive than ordinary.

"Won't ye walk in, Jasper?" asked Mrs. Barnes, stepping aside from the doorway, to which the sound of coming footsteps had hastily drawn her, hoping against hope that the comer might be her husband.

Neither she nor Myra ventured to answer that question in words, but their faces spoke plainly enough. On each showed sad lines, that told of sleepless hours and killing worry.

Although Gilbert Cochrane, thanks to the

awful faintness which overcame him—the combined result of anxiety, that fearful fight in Deep Pool, and the stunning blow inflicted by the bullet of the half-crazed squatter as it glanced from his skull—had only told them enough to show that Luke Barnes had gotten into some ugly scrape, which bade fair to end in his imprisonment, if not his death.

With all this to trouble them, little wonder that they bore signs of care and suffering.

If Naughton saw aught of this, he did not see fit to make allusion to it, and though he hesitated for a moment, he finally accepted that faint-hearted invitation, and entered the house.

"I happened to be passin' by, an' I reckoned mebbe I mought as well step in, ladies," he said, seating himself with his back to the door, thus keeping his bruised, discolored face as much in the shadow as might be.

"'Twas neighborly in ye, Jasper," said Mrs. Barnes, her usually strong, even sharp tones, strangely softened by grief and suspense. "I don't reckon they's any news stirrin'?"

"Nothin' more'n what happened yest'day, but—"

"What happened?" eagerly asked Myra, though she shrunk back from that glowing gaze as she spoke.

"Then—It cain't be nobody hain't told ye yet how that pore critter was stabbed to his death?" ejaculated Naughton, in genuine amaze.

"What critter? Who? We hain't hear a word, Jasper! Ye see, my man has gone to town—went that afore—"

Mrs. Barnes broke off in a fit of coughing, but in her agitation she gave too poor a counterfeit to deceive her visitor.

"Well, I want to know!" he ejaculated, in mock surprise. "I reckoned the hull county known all 'bout it 'fore this! Gil Cochrane done murdered a man, who—"

"You lie, Jasper Naughton!" impulsively cried Myra, flushing hotly, only to pale again as she drew back, with face hidden in her hands.

She realized the awful dilemma. If Gilbert was innocent, her own father must be guilty! In no other manner could that strange, tragic scene in their home between the two men be accounted for.

"You, Myr' Ellen!" sharply cried her mother, but Jasper Naughton laughed harshly as he said:

"Never you mind, mammy. Harder the quarrel, sweeter the makin' up ag'in! An' I reckon Myr' Ellen 'nd me understand each other. Eh, sweetness?"

"I didn't mean—I don't understand you, sir!"

The poor girl hardly knew what words passed her lips, just then. She was trying—lover or father! Which was guilty?

Despite his assumed jocosity, Naughton was hotly inflamed by that exclamation, and with his brain buzzing from the bad liquor he had been drinking so freely, he resolved to lose no more time in coming to the point.

"If you don't git over that misunderstandin' in a hurry, Myr' Ellen, 'twon't be my fault fer not talkin' right out. An' so—when're we goin' to git married, sweetness?"

"Don't—this ain't no fitten time to bring up sech doin's, Jasper," interposed Mrs. Barnes, more unlike her usual self than ever. "You better wait until my man gits back from town, I do reckon."

"When do you reckon he'll git back, mammy?"

Mrs. Barnes and Myra both noticed that poorly hidden sneer, and his insolent manner frightened them still worse. Surely something evil must have happened on that luckless night!

"He didn't jest say, but I'm lookin' fer him 'most any time, now, Jasper," she managed to reply with comparative steadiness.

"They'll be plenty of time to do our part o' settlin' the matter, I reckon, anyway," he chuckled. "An' Luke is in favor of it, as he's told ye both, plenty o' times. So—don't be so pesky bashful, Myr' Ellen! When'll I hev to ax the preacher to do the job?"

"Mother?" appealingly murmured the girl, longing to tell this drunken brute just what she thought of him, yet refraining on her father's account.

"I ain't axin' your mother to marry me, Myr' Ellen," doggedly interposed Naughton. "I'm axin' *you*, an' I'm waitin' fer your answer. When will you be ready to hitch up?"

"Never—with you!" flashed the persecuted girl, angrily.

"It'll be never—with the critter you've tuck to thinkin' of so mighty much o' late, Myr' Ellen Barnes!" viciously cried Naughton, losing the remnant of his manners in his hot rage. "It'll be never with Gil Cochrane, an' I tell you flat!"

"What right hev you to couple my child's name with that of her family's wu'st enemy, Jasper Naughton?"

"The right o' knowin' what I know, an' seein' what I've see'd! But it's never goin' to git any furder, ef I hev to—Say, Mrs. Barnes," with forced composure which his glowing eyes betrayed was simply external: "Kin you guess what all happened the night of the barbecue,

Big Bandy.

when your man went 'long 'ith Gentry to Holler Hill?"

"Nothin' ag'inst my man, ef you was a angel come down from Heaven, 'stead o' bein' a drunken—Don't you dast to say it, Jap Naughton!"

"I wouldn't say nothin', ef Myr' Ellen 'd jest act white," sullenly growled the cur. "Ef she'll up an' keep the barg'in made atwixt us all, I'll bite the tongue o' me clean out by the roots afore lettin' drop even a hint ag'inst her pap. But—it's one or t'other, Mother Barnes! One or t'other, I tell ye—hard!"

"Dare him to speak out, mother?" flashed Myra, looking very beautiful in her indignation as she stood facing the half-drunken wretch. "He knows nothing that we may be afraid to hear. He is a liar, born and bred!"

"Go a little slow, Myr' Ellen Barnes!" angrily snarled Naughton, rising to his feet and leaning heavily on the back of the chair which he had until then occupied. "Mebbe you don't know it, but I kin hitch a tight rope 'round the neck o' either your lover or your father, jest as I see fitten! An' so I say—go slow, while my temper holds out, or mebbe you'll be the one to do the settlin' jest which one shell go up a tree at the eend of a rope!"

"You don't dast!" panted Mrs. Barnes, a hand clasped tightly over her wildly-throbbing heart. "Ef you dast lie 'bout my man—"

"Go, you drunken cur!" sternly cried Myra, pointing to the door behind him. "When father comes home, I'll repeat your words, and he'll break every bone in your vile carcass for this foul insult!"

Naughton turned a bit pale at this threat. He had not meant to say nearly so much at first, but his anger, combined with the fumes of the whisky he had swallowed so freely, drove all discretion from his tongue.

But since he had so far committed himself, he could not well retract, and with an ugly laugh, he cried:

"Tell Luke, an' see what his face'll tell you, Myr' Ellen Barnes! An', more'n that, sweetness: he'll bid ye fergit the devil who's done his level best to ruin ye all an' drive ye out from the ruff your pap paid honest money fer! He'll tell ye to take up with a honest offer while it's left open to ye!"

"Yours? I'd rather die in a hog lot of starvation, Jasper Naughton! Will you go? Don't you see this is killing my mother?"

"Better a honest death like this, then to be killed by inches 'ith grievin' over a lost child, Myr' Ellen Barnes!"

"What do you mean, Jasper Naughton?" demanded Myra, pale as death, but with proudly flashing eyes as she gazed into his flushed face.

"I mean that I know what's bin goin' on fer the last week or two," recklessly snarled the cur, throwing all prudence aside in his vicious rage. "I know that Luke Barnes's girl has 'lowed herself to go clean ag'inst her folks! I know that she's bin bought over by the money an' big promises o' the devil who's done his level wu'st to ruin 'em, out an' out! An' I kin guess the price she give him back ag'in, fer I—"

The foul insult was cut short as Myra sprung forward and struck his thick lips with her clinched hand, so fiercely that he reeled back—to be felled by the fist of Luke Barnes himself!

With a hoarse, inarticulate growl, Barnes picked him up and flung him out of doors, where Naughton scrambled up to level a pistol at the squatter. Then—a sharp report rung out upon the air!

CHAPTER XXXV.

BIG BANDY OFFERS A BRIBE.

"DRAP it! Drap it like ye ketched the wrong end of a hot poker, Jap Naughton!"

The shot came from outside the cabin, but it was not discharged by the angry man who had so effectually ruined his chances in that quarter. And, struck by a deftly aimed bullet, his revolver was torn from his tingling grip, the particles of lead stinging his hand as though he had thrust it into a yellow-jackets' nest.

His howling curse of rage and pain was blended with that stern command, and whirling half about, he saw the Brigadier of Hollow Hill covering him with the pistol which had already done such good work.

"Try to pull 'nother gun, Jap Naughton, an' I'll take finger with the weapon, next time!" cried Big Bandy, his eyes fairly ablaze as they crossed that leveled tube. "Git—git while the way's open, critter!"

"An' never you come back this way, you whelp, 'thout you fetch your grave-clo'es!" sternly added the squatter from his door.

Naughton glanced swiftly from man to man, fairly suffocating with rage and humiliation, not unmixed with fear. And as he read death in those weapons, he slowly turned away, chin on shoulder as he grated:

"I'm drunk, now, and two to one is bigger odds than I kin easy git away with. But, keep it in the mind o' ye, Luke Barnes! I'll even up fer all o' this, afore the snow begins to fly!"

"Even jestice all 'round 'll suit us heap sight better'n 'twill the likes o' you, Jap Naughton," coolly retorted Big Bandy, following the slug-

gish movements of the younger man with his weapon.

Perhaps it was just as well he kept on guard, for as he reached the bars, near which he had hitched his horse, Naughton wheeled swiftly, hand on pistol like one ready to draw and risk a snap-shot.

"You ain't hafe-flyin', Jasper!" chuckled the brigadier, grimly. "Set a copy fer that snow you talked about, cain't ye?"

"All right. I'll go now. But I'll come back ag'in. Don't you reckon I won't, Luke Barnes?" snarled the rascal, leaping into the saddle, then casting over his shoulder as he rode away: "An' I'll fetch a rope 'long with me, too!"

Knowing full well the real meaning of that vicious threat, Luke Barnes lifted his pistol, but Big Bandy swiftly interposed his broad form until the distance was too great for anything like a sure shot, at the same time sternly muttering:

"That head o' yours grows hotter with each year, Luke Barnes! Do you want to kick up the county wuss then it is a'ready?"

"You hear the dirty whelp hint at hangin', brigadier!" muttered the squatter, his head drooping a bit as he encountered that grave, displeased gaze.

"He's full o' whisky, Luke, an' that don't leave much room fer good sense. He's a bigger fool than folks call me. But ef you drapped him by a bullet, as ye reckoned on doin', then thar'd be three in a row, an' blind man's choice to pick out the biggest!"

"You don't know what I ketched him at!"

"Nur I hain't time nur wantin' to ax, Luke," his tones growing graver, an anxious expression spreading over his scarred face as he drew nearer to the squatter. "I come to make you a offer, Luke, an' ef you'll meet me on the level, like one old soldier should meet his comrade, it'll come out all the better fer everybody. Will you?"

Luke Barnes hesitated, trying to read the truth in those glowing eyes before venturing a reply. Somehow he feared being drawn into a trap which might make fresh trouble for him and his.

"I've bin away, brigadier, an' so hain't kep' clean up 'ith the home news. Ef you'd wait ontel I kin git posted, mebbe I'd know better how to answer ye on that p'int."

"So I've got news, Luke, and part of it runs like this: I've found out whar them lost deeds is hid, over in Holler Hill, an'—"

"Not—not my title?" hoarsely panted Luke, while from the cabin came a hysterical cry of joy as Mrs. Barnes came staggering to the front door.

"Jest them same!" emphatically nodded the brigadier, answering both man and wife at the same time.

For the next few minutes there was a commotion and a confusion which would be hard to untangle sufficiently for recording here, but then Big Bandy, with the trio of half-joyous, half-doubting folk about him as he stood in the center of the room, spoke gravely:

"I tell you true, fri'nds, I've got them papers right whar I kin lay my two hands onto 'em any minute I'm nigh the hidin'-place."

"Why didn't you fetch 'em with you, man?" huskily asked Barnes.

"That's part o' the secret, an' they ain't time to go into it all the way through. Ef they're wu'th the trouble o' your goin' all the way to Holler Hill, I'm willin' to show ye jest whar they're hid out."

"I'm ready the minute you be—more'n ready, man!"

"An' you, ladies? Kin yo u make the trip long 'o us?"

"What's the use o' all that?" frowned Luke, something of his old suspicions returning as he recalled the strong friendship which had long existed between Big Bandy and Gilbert Cochrane.

"It's part o' the job, an' ef you don't want the papers 'nough to foller d'rections, mebbe they'll wait ontel you do," coldly said Big Bandy, turning toward the door as though abandoning his mission.

"We'll go—go ef we hev to crawl on our two knees!"

"With father to protect us, what need we fear?" half-sobbed Myra, clinging closer, more lovingly to that parent.

"Which shell it be, Luke Barnes?" gravely asked the brigadier. "I kin show you the papers to-night, ef you come. I ain't so mighty sure I kin do it ef you let 'nother night pass over onimproved. Which is it?"

"Go, husband!" pleaded Mrs. Barnes. "Think what it'll be to hev our own ag'in! Think what it'll be to show all the county we was only holdin' out fer our just rights! An' let us go with you!"

Luke Barnes yielded, being too nearly dazed by this unlooked-for, unhoped-for blessing. He could not fully realize it, but he made no further objections to letting both wife and daughter bear them company.

Preparations were made for an instant starting. These were simple enough, since Luke had not ventured to ride back to his home, in quest of news, leaving his horse securely hidden

in the hills, where he had lain in hiding himself until anxiety drove him forth. Big Bandy had also come afoot, so this left but one horse available for both women.

By the time this was prepared, twilight was deepening into darkness, and as the moon would be later in rising, since it had passed the full, there could be little danger to Luke in following the road which led toward Brimstone Butte. In case any unfriendly persons should be met by the way, he could easily slip into the woods on either side.

But the trip was made without encountering a living person, and as Big Bandy refused to talk by the way, the little party reached his lone cabin home without being any wiser than when they started.

Hitching the horse in a thicket near the hut, where it could nibble at the twigs, Big Bandy led the way into his house, lighting a lantern and by its rays opening a secret door at the back of his hut: a cunningly contrived section of logs, swinging around on a pivot, behind which yawned the mouth of what seemed to be a natural cave.

"The papers is in here, Luke Barnes," said the brigadier, turning around after he had stepped within the gloomy passage. "Just give the door a kick ahind ye, please, then fetch the ladies on. I'll hold the light so ye kin see to not git bumped whar it's low an' narrer."

If he had asked them to follow, perhaps Luke would have hesitated, if not actually refused to go further; but he took everything for granted, and Mrs. Barnes pushed ahead of her husband. So he followed, after closing the log-door behind them.

"How much furder, brigadier?" he asked, as their guide led them to an abrupt enlargement, forming a spacious chamber which nature had hollowed out of the living rock.

"Not any, Luke," gravely replied Big Bandy, holding the lantern in one hand while he took a flat package from his bosom with the other. "Right hyar you see the title deeds to your farm, Luke, but afore you take 'em from my hand, let me tell you a word or two.

"They've bin signed an' 'nowledged an' sealed, fer mor'n six months past. Lawyer Wycherly, at Jimtown, hes held 'em all that time, ready an' waitin' fer you to drap in an' ax fer 'em."

"But—I don't understand!" muttered the bewildered squatter.

"I know ye don't, but I'm hopin' ye will, Luke," with increased gravity in both face and voice. "The 'riginal deeds was lost, nur they hain't ever bin found. These is new deeds, made by Gilbert Cochrane. He told me to git an' give 'em to you, but afore I do that, I cain't help axin' you, Luke, will you let a honest man like him hang fer the killin' another hand done?"

"He lies ef he says I done it!" hoarsely cried the squatter, one hand dropping to the butt of a revolver.

"Ef you didn't, then who did kill the pore critter?" earnestly asked the brigadier, with the light turned squarely upon that pale, rage-convinced face.

But before Luke Barnes could attempt an answer, a clear, earnest voice came out of the darkness behind Big Bandy.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HOW LUKE'S EYES WERE OPENED.

AND that voice pronounced the emphatic words:

"Whoever else may have killed the man, I know Luke Barnes is innocent!"

"A cussed trap!" cried the squatter, jerking out his pistol, but before he could use it upon the owner of that pale, spectral face just becoming visible out of the surrounding gloom, Big Bandy dropped his lantern and sprang forward, pinioning the man's arms and disarming him at one and the same time.

"No trap, as heaven hears me!" cried Gilbert Cochrane. "Mrs. Barnes—Myra—you will trust in my sacred oath!"

"And I'm backing him up in giving it, everybody!" added Sheriff Hooper, picking up the light before it could go out. "We're all good friends here, and before this night ends the real criminal may be unmasked!"

Of course there was a period of intense excitement, with more or less confusion, but with Luke Barnes disarmed, and with Myra begging him to be patient until all might be explained, matters gradually calmed down, and in place of hot threats, calm explanations were in order.

To begin with, Big Bandy declared that he had acted on his own judgment in luring the family to that spot.

"Fer Mr. Cochrane jest told me to give the papers to Mrs. Barnes. I 'lowed to do it, an' would, only fer ketchin' Luke to home—an' him 'gaged in kickin' the dirty whelp who's at the bottom o' all this ugly truble, too, out o' his house! Only fer that, I reckon I'd a' done my arrand jest as I was told."

"And now, before we go any further, I want to ask Miss Barnes if she has the sealed note I gave her, to be handed to Wycherly,

Big Bandy.

the lawyer, in case any trouble should befall me," quietly asked Cochrane.

With a blush, visible even in that semi-darkness, Myra took the envelope from her bosom and held it toward the young man. He declined it, asking Sheriff Hooper to open and read aloud the contents.

It was an order to Lawyer Wycherly to deliver to bearer, if one of the Barnes family, the deeds which he had held in trust since a given date.

"You see, Mr. Barnes," with a faint smile, "I wanted to make sure you would not be the sufferer in case anything should happen to me. I knew Naughton and others were ready to down me, if a fair chance offered, and so I took this simple precaution. If I had been killed, the lawyer was to at once communicate with you."

Luke stammered something, but Big Bandy cut him short.

"You've got to take the better with the sweet, Luke, this night. Ef that's heap to be thankful fer, so they's plenty to make ye feel jest the other way. An' as time is passin', the sooner I show ye to the place whar them two blind eyes o' yourn hev got to fly open an' see like a white man, the better! Kin I trust you wimmen critters to jest bite your tongues an' say nothin', no matter what ye may see or hear?"

"For Luke's sake quite as much as mine," quickly supplemented Cochrane, but before he could say more, Barnes demanded:

"What is goin' on, Big Bandy? I've gone with my two eyes shet jest as fur as any man kin lead me, an' ef you don't make the way cl'ar, I'll rack out o' this or die a-tryin'!"

"I'm goin' to show ye what a plum' fool them as you reckoned was your truest fri'nds hes bin makin' out o' ye, Luke Barnes. I'm goin' to take you whar you kin see with your own eyes, hear with your own ears, what I hearn my own self, but couldn't prove 'thout witnesses. I purty nigh know who butchered Barney Budge, an' I hope you'll all know it even plainer afore this night is over with!"

Sheriff Hooper put in an earnest word, telling how narrowly Gilbert Cochrane had escaped being lynched for a crime of which he was totally innocent, though his knife was proven to have been the fatal weapon.

"Only for the brigadier who warned us to flee before the mob got to the house, and who led us here in safety, Cochrane would have suffered for another's crime, all because he would not tell with whom he had that fight at Deep Pool."

"I couldn't tell, because I did not recognize the man," swiftly interjected Gilbert before a sound could escape the squatter's lips. "I swore that he was a stranger to me, and could only describe him as short and stocky in build, with either gray or very light hair."

"All of which failed to throw even a speck of dust into my eyes, Luke," grimly laughed the sheriff. "I know who that man was, and if it comes to either his hanging, or the hanging of Gilbert Cochrane, I know whose neck I'll fit the noose around!"

"Plenty said is heap better'n too much, fri'nds," sharply interposed Big Bandy, taking the lantern again and moving away a few paces. "Ef you want to git at the bottom facts, foller me! An'-fer the life o' us all, don't even make a whisper out loud!"

Worn by all he had undergone of late, his bodily and mental powers weakened, Luke Barnes did not know how to longer resist the will of all the others. And though he felt more than dubious as to the outcome, he permitted his wife and daughter to hurry him along after Big Bandy.

The mountain really deserved its name of Hollow Hill, for its interior seemed fairly honeycombed with narrow passages and chambers, some of them far too extensive for the single lantern to even shadow forth their real dimensions. But General Bandy was never at a loss, leading the way without an instant's hesitation or once pausing for consideration.

Long before the end of that subterranean journey was reached it came to pass that Myra was stolen from her parents' protection, and taken into that of Gilbert Cochrane. And while the warning of Big Bandy was broken, in part, be sure those whispers were audible only to the ears of the young people themselves!

At length the brigadier paused, turning to softly whisper a warning to keep all perfectly still. They were almost at the end, and a single word, a single sound, might not only ruin their hopes of getting at the whole truth of that tragedy, but might end in their own killing as well!

Big Bandy left the lantern around an angle in the passage where this warning was given, then guided his companions, one by one, across a small chamber, to a rock wall, through cracks in which a faint light sifted. And then, with bated breath and throbbing hearts, they all gazed upon the scene before them.

A rock chamber was fairly well lighted up by a fire, and a couple of lanterns, revealing some rude furniture, with other articles which caused Sheriff Hooper to grimly chuckle below his breath, and Luke Barnes to catch his breath sharply.

"Fer your wimmens' lives, be still!" softly breathed Big Bandy, in his ear, then turned and moved silently away on the back trail.

For gathered in that cave-chamber were all of the gang who, under Green Gentry, had engaged in making counterfeit money. And that this very chamber was their workshop, both men fully realized.

Green Gentry was speaking when the party took up their stations, and he was rapidly reviewing the events which had transpired since the night before the barbecue took place.

Without fully incriminating himself, he made it clear to all that he and Naughton had taken part in capturing and misusing Sheriff Hooper, knowing from secret advices that he was on his way to open a hard campaign against the moonshiners.

"And that meant breaking up our coining, for a time, if not landing us all behind the bars!" he fiercely declared, by way of excuse.

Then he spoke of the capture of Bruce McKay, the Secret Service spy, whom he declared to be working in conjunction with Hooper. He also declared that Gilbert Cochrane was, and had been for two years past, secretly in the pay of the Secret Service, and that they owed much of their past trouble to him.

"Then, too, we've been in danger from Luke Barnes and his infernal scruples. If too honest to join in coining, he would be ready enough to bear witness against all of us to save himself, when trouble came! And so, hoping that the death-ticket would fall to him, I watched and followed the elected one with the spy, to near the Deep Pool, breaking the very laws I had made, to guard against possible treachery on the part of another."

"Who killed the spy, ef Luke didn't?" asked Fuller, curiously.

"Gil Cochrane!" was the prompt response, with a vicious nod and showing of his white teeth. "Luke turned him free, which makes him a foul traitor and deserving of the death penalty! And then, to lay the blame on Luke's shoulders, Cochrane followed and stabbed the spy!"

"But—how come he to leave the knife behind?"

"Because I jumped out and scared him off before he could pull it from the bones!" glibly lied Gentry, having evidently studied his part thoroughly before entering upon it. "And then—"

But he was fated never to finish that sentence.

Even as he spoke, a wild-looking figure leaped into the chamber, and the deep voice of Big Bandy thundered forth the command:

"Surrender, critters, or die!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

FOR an instant the counterfeitors seemed petrified by surprise, but as other shapes began to show themselves back of the brigadier, Green Gentry rallied sufficiently to cry out, savagely:

"Big Bandy! Sold out—kill him, sure, ladis!"

He tried to back up his own sanguinary words with actions to suit, and fired a shot at that deformed figure whose saber was flashing in the ruddy glow of the fire, but if his lead found its mark, General Bandy gave no evidence of that fact.

"Down yer weapons an' holler fer quarter!" he again thundered, as he leaped forward to once more disarm Gentry by a swift passage of his saber.

With a snarling curse, the chief of the coiners darted aside, then ran swiftly across the chamber, stooping to—

Just what, could not be seen by his enemies, but his friends seemed to anticipate what was to follow, for they desperately charged upon the force led by the brigadier, though half their blows went wide of the mark, as those who dealt them seemed more in fear of what menaced them from the rear than of any human foeman in front.

And in another instant there came a heavy report, followed by a mighty rumbling, groaning, crashing, stunning convulsion that seemed to threaten the very existence of Brimstone Butte!

Of all who witnessed that sudden irruption of armed men, probably not one was more completely taken by surprise than Sheriff John Hooper himself.

He knew that Big Bandy had stolen away from their little party of espial, and he knew that it was at least partly for the purpose of finding the armed posse, sent in response to the dispatch from the sheriff when he first reached Jimtown with his prisoner, Gilbert Cochrane. But he understood that the brigadier was to guide that posse direct to the spot where the sheriff waited, turning the command over to him and showing him the passage by which the armed force might surprise the coiners.

Trusting to this understanding, his amazement and—after the first shock had passed by—his intense chagrin at thus having the leadership taken out of his hands, may better be guessed than told.

An angry cry escaped his lips, and he tried to find the fabled passage connecting the two

chambers in the dark, but without success in the few moments granted him after that first challenge.

Cochrane, too, was greatly excited, though in part from a very different cause. He saw what Green Gentry was about to do, and with a hoarse cry of warning, he caught Myra in his arms, pushing Mrs. Barnes as far back as possible, then—tried to shield his loved one from harm by bowing over her trembling figure his own athletic frame.

The shock of the explosion flung them all down, and that even one should survive seemed little short of a miracle.

Confined in a double sense, the powder performed terrible work, rending walls apart that had until then appeared solid, sending down great masses of stone and composition, building up barriers where none had existed before. The entire Hill seemed crumbling to pieces!

"Myra, my love!"

Those were the first words spoken, but though the girl made no reply, both Mrs. Barnes and Hooper called out, their voices sounding strangely in that altered atmosphere. Never before had the Hollow Hill better deserved its title of Brimstone Butte! Sulphur springs had won for it that name, but now the very fumes of Tar-tarus seemed poured into its bowels.

"A light—the lantern!" panted Gilbert, in an agony of fear lest he had lost his dearest treasure by that terrible shock.

"Gilbert—I believe—he lied!" brokenly panted Myra, with the first effort of reviving brain.

And though Hooper, one arm hanging uselessly at his side, broken by a fragment of falling rock, held up the match he had lighted in vain, Cochrane had Myra tight-clasped to his bosom, seemingly trying to kiss away what little breath that awful shock had left the poor girl!

That flickering light showed Hooper this, and also Mrs. Barnes, crouched in a heap on the rock-strewn floor, close beside her husband, who lay on his back, like one stricken dead.

"Big Bandy!" the sheriff cried, but his voice sounded to him as though it was pent up inside of a coffin.

Another match showed him only a huge mass of fallen rocks where had been the cracked partition through which he had watched the coiners, and his heart turned faint within him as he wondered if that entire party, of friends and enemies both, had been wiped out forever by the desperate action of Green Gentry?

If so, who could disprove the vicious charges made by the chief of the counterfeitors against both Cochrane and Luke Barnes?

Lighting still another match, Hooper was turning in the other direction, when the squatter struggled to a sitting position, uttering a hoarse, dazed ejaculation as he did so.

"Barnes!" cried Hooper, shaking off the faintness which bade fair to overpower him unless he could find a purer atmosphere to breathe. "Help me find—the lantern! We're lost if—Help look, I say!"

This almost despairing appeal brought Gilbert Cochrane back to earth again, and as he had escaped the shock, and the fall of rock without harm, he was one of the first to reach the spot and find the lantern.

The glass was broken, but the light was still serviceable, and in a very few minutes more it was burning brightly, to reveal—

"Good Lawd!" gasped Luke Barnes, shrinking back, trembling in every limb as he pointed to a motionless figure sitting in what seemed a niche roughly gouged out of the living rock.

"It's a mummy—see!" exclaimed Cochrane, as he took the light and advanced alone, holding it up to cast its rays upon the figure.

So it seemed. What had once been a living, breathing, intelligent being, was now little better than a dry, wrinkled shell, retaining a semblance of humanity, but only as a gross caricature resembles its original.

"It was a nigger, once," said Hooper, who was feeling better now that the horrible darkness was broken, and the air was growing purer. "His wool still clings to the skull, and—"

He kicked at a little head lying near that crouching figure, then started back in amazement as the dust-covered envelope broke, revealing articles of plate, both gold and silver.

"Uncle Jupiter!" cried Cochrane, the truth bursting upon him like a revelation as he saw those precious articles of use and ornament. "This solves the secret of his disappearance! He died here, maybe walled in by a fall of rock, just as he has been discovered through such another happening!"

"Uncle Jupe!" echoed Luke Barnes, though his superstition held him back at a safe distance. "Then—if he's kep' my papers!"

"He can keep 'em a little longer!" interposed the sheriff, who was shaking the little lamp close to one ear. "The lard's 'most out, and if it don't last until we can pick our way out o' this cursed labyrinth, it's good-by every last one o' us!"

In that horrible possibility, both treasure and Uncle Jupe were forgotten, and all tried to estimate their chances of escape without the aid of Big Bandy.

"We'll have to do without him, if we do at

all," gloomily muttered Hooper, forming a rude sling for his broken arm as they left that gruesome sight behind them. "He was mashed into a pancake, with the rest of those in yonder!"

"I'm trying to hope better things," said Cochrane, taking the lead with the light, protected by a curved palm against the varying currents of air. "I believe he'll come out all right, just as we will. And then we'll straighten matters out so that not a single snarl remains!"

"Well, I'm hopin' one thing: that Green Gentry may be found with life in his body and motion to his tongue!" grimly muttered the sheriff.

No one asked for his reasons. Those devilishly malignant sentences came back to the memory of all, and they knew that the worst of the breakers were still before them.

Cochrane led the way as rapidly as he dared venture, guided now by a track in the dust, now by a real or fancied recognition of some oddly shaped point or projection, at others by pure instinct. Naturally he fully realized his awful responsibility, knowing that should the light expire before the end was reached and light of day—or night—found, they might be doomed to a living death in that bewildering labyrinth. But his courage never once failed him, for had he not more than life to fight for.

During that trying journey, Sheriff Hooper was doing considerable thinking, based on the words spoken by Green Gentry. And though he had but one arm to use or depend on, he made up his mind that Luke Barnes should never pass out of his sight while the death of Barney Budge remained unsolved.

He could say nothing of this, since Mrs. Barnes kept close to the side of her husband, but as Cochrane uttered a cry of delight, saying that the secret door giving admittance to the log cabin was reached, he drew his revolver and moved closer to the squatter.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST SECRET.

GILBERT COCHRANE had made no mistake. He had indeed guided them safely through the labyrinth, and just in time, too! For as he pushed the door of logs around on its pivot, the dimly burning lamp expired.

"Steady, all of you!" cried Hooper, his shoulder touching that of Luke Barnes as he added: "Let Cochrane stir up the fire first, so we can see what's before us all!"

Gilbert lost little time in doing this, and as the bright blaze illuminated the room, Hooper covertly showed the squatter his pistol, hidden from the others, and warningly muttered:

"Keep close with us, Luke, or I'll have to send for you! All in a heap until we find out just who did that killing!"

"You hear what—he done it!" moodily mumbled the squatter, with a swift glance toward Gilbert, who was doing his best to make the women comfortable with the limited conveniences at hand.

"I know better, and so do you," in the same guarded tones. "If he hated you bad enough for that, reckon he'd be taking all this risk and trouble to help you out!"

"Ef he didn't, who did?"

"Green Gentry, or Jasper Naughton, or some of that gang. And if you want to clear yourself—for I swear I'll hang you if I can't save Cochrane any other way!—you'll help find out just who did deal that coward's blow, Luke Barnes!"

"Tell me how, an' I'll do what I kin."

The spirit of the squatter was sorely broken by all he had undergone of late, and where, a week before, he would have met threats with fierce defiance, now he meekly bowed his head before them.

Having assured himself that neither Mrs. Barnes nor Myra had received any material injury in the explosion, Gilbert turned to Hooper, under his directions bandaging the broken arm so that the bones would not grate together and excite inflammation by the movements of its owner, for, as the sheriff said, they must at once set out for the other entrance to that cavern, where such wild havoc had been wrought.

Both Cochrane and Hooper had a pretty accurate idea as to where that entrance was located, thanks to their talk with Big Bandy, and though some little time was lost in trying to persuade the women to remain at the cabin, in vain, less than an hour passed before they left the lonely building and picked their way through the moonlit night.

Fortunately, they were spared the trouble of actually searching for the hidden entrance, for as they drew nearer the spot, they caught sight of a bright bonfire, and after a little reconnoitering, Hooper recognized friends, and called his party forward.

"Ugly work, sheriff!" gloomily uttered one of the posse, at the same time casting a look toward a figure lying motionless, wrapped in an army overcoat. "Two of my men killed by falling rocks. Him dead or so nigh dead there's no fun in it!"

"Who—not Big Bandy?"

But Big Bandy it was, nevertheless, lying without life or motion, the scalp torn from a

wide strip on the skull, and one of his arms broken in two places. And though his heart was beating feebly, none who gazed gloomily upon him by that wild light, could hope that he would ever return to consciousness again.

Begging Mrs. Barnes to see what she could do for the poor fellow, Hooper turned away, in company with Cochrane, to learn more fully just what damage that explosion had wrought.

And even as they gained the mouth of the cave, which was the same into which the eyes of ill-fated Barney Budge had watched his dangerous game disappear, that night, they were met by one of the posse who excitedly exclaimed:

"Glory, Sheriff Hooper! you're just the man I wanted most! There's a fellow caught under a big rock, back in the second chamber, and he's got something to say! Come and—"

"What fellow?"

"One of the prisoners said it was Gentry, or some such name, but—"

"Alive?"

"What there is left of him," with an involuntary shiver. "He set off the shot, and a big rock caught him. His legs are crushed, clean to the hips, and though he begs us to set him free, we couldn't do that without drilling and blasting the big rock. And you know what that would mean, sheriff?"

Forgetting his own injuries, Hooper hastened to the second cavern, where Gentry had sought, by a carefully calculated blast, prepared many weeks before for that express purpose, to destroy and bury the coining implements from sight forever. And though what he saw fairly chilled his blood, he nerved himself to extract the truth from the lips of the dying man.

His practiced eyes told him the criminal's minutes were numbered, though Gentry was suffering comparatively little pain. The very enormity of his hurts had dumbered his sensibilities.

He recognized Hooper at once, and begged him to set him free. And knowing that death would soon enable him to do this, to at least a portion of the dying wretch's body, Hooper promised, on conditions: that he confess before witnesses just how Barney Budge died.

At first Gentry doggedly repeated what he had said just before the explosion, but when Hooper turned his back as though about to leave him to his fate, his spirit broke, and he made a full confession.

He had spoken truth in saying that, to make sure the elected man did not prove false to his trust, he had dogged Luke Barnes and his captive to near the Deep Pool. He saw Cochrane interfere, but held back in hopes that one or the other of the two men would be killed, when he could force the survivor to murder the spy. But as they fell into the water, Bruce McKay shook off part of his bonds, and picking up the knife dropped by Cochrane, cut the rest and fled, before he, Gentry, could interfere.

He followed after the spy, and knocking him down, plunged the ivory-handled knife to the hilt in his back. And then he lay in wait until he saw both Luke Barnes and Gilbert Cochrane give up the quest and, not far apart, yet unconscious of the other's proximity, both ride away through the night. And leaving that fatal knife in its bloody sheath, Gentry stole away, planning how to cause the discovery of the corpse by some disinterested person.

Fate took that matter out of his hands, and the rest is known.

When his story was fully told, he again begged to be set free. And then Hooper frankly told him the truth: that he was already dying.

His end was quickened by the savage burst of fury which greeted this announcement, and after one horrible minute, death indeed came to his relief.

In addition to two of the posse and Gentry himself, Jasper Naughton and Gene Fuller had been caught and killed by the falling rocks, while all of the other coiners had been taken prisoners.

When this was fully ascertained, Hooper and Cochrane caused a litter to be made on which Big Bandy was carried to his cabin, there to await the coming of a doctor, after whom a messenger, well mounted, had long since been dispatched. And when day was dawning, the man of medicine looked up from his patient with a grave smile, to say:

"With heaven's aid, the brigadier will live! And—unless I'm badly at fault, he will waken in his right mind, at last!"

That glad prediction was fully verified, when the sun was crossing its meridian. And Big Bandy was Big Bandy no longer!

Instead—KENNETH BARBOUR!

All between the present awaking and that awful day when, with so many boys in blue, and a few Confederates like himself, he had been blown up in "The Crater," was forever after a blank. And in days to come Kenneth Barbour was to pass many a sadly-happy hour listening to the stories told of his doings and sayings when he was "Big Bandy, the Brigadier of Brimstone Butte!"

Green Gentry's confession cleared both Luke Barnes and Gilbert Cochrane, and save at the

trial of the coiners, the death of Bruce McKay was never brought up again.

The curious niche, with its grim inhabitant, was investigated, and as the missing plate, gold and other money, with all the lost papers belonging to the Barbour estate were found, every one believed that this solved the secret of Uncle Jupiter's strange disappearance.

Just how he came to be so walled in, could only be guessed at, since the explosion had destroyed the walls; but the general belief was that an accidental fall of a rock had closed the faithful slave in, beyond the possibility of escape.

Among the papers were found the deeds which proved Luke Barnes had duly paid for his farm, so the later ones prepared by Gilbert Cochrane, only went to prove his sincerity. And when he handed them back, Luke Barnes gave his right hand with them, saying:

"I reckon we've both bin part to blame, Mr. Cochrane, but ef you'll say so I'm more'n willin' to drop the hull pesky matter!"

"But I'm not!" gravely declared Gilbert, though there was a half-merry twinkle about his eyes that betrayed him. "You owe me much more than that, and I'll hold back my hand until you place another in it—for life!"

"You Myr' Ellen Barnes!"

"What is, it daddy?"

"You rack out hyar—in a powerful hurry, too, Myr' Ellen!"

And then—

But of course!

Well, when the whole truth was told, and John Hooper took the stump with his broken arm, Carl Krishtner "took to the brush!" At least he showed his prudence by withdrawing from the track, and thus the sheriff was re-elected without opposition.

And "Big Bandy" joined with Luke Barnes in wildly cheering the victor!

THE END.

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